

No Man's Land - Exploring South Asianness

22 May 2004

Symposium Report

**Shiromi Pinto
June 2004**

Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Participants
- 3 Summary of the day's proceedings
 - 3.1 Chair's introduction
 - 3.2 Keynote address: No man's land - locating South Asianness
 - 3.3 Panel 1 - Claiming new ground - settlers, nomads or fugitives?
 - 3.4 Presentation: A sheltering sky? - Negotiating identity through South Asian dance
 - 3.5 Film: *Dancing Divinities* - Lisa Chandarana
 - 3.6 Panel 2 - Wild blue yonder: art, identity and representation beyond borders
 - 3.7 Chair's summary of the day's proceedings - Claiming 'No Man's Land'
- 4 Conclusion
- 5 Summary of key points
- 6 Appendices
 - Appendix 1 *No Man's Land* agenda
 - Appendix 2 Participants' biographies
 - Appendix 3 Keynote speech: 'What is South Asian?' - Sunil Khilnani
 - Appendix 4 Presentation: 'A sheltering sky? - Negotiating identity through South Asian dance' - Dr Andrée Grau

1 Introduction

To celebrate its 25th anniversary, Akademi, in collaboration with the ICA, presented *No Man's Land - Exploring South Asianness* on Saturday, 22 May 2004. Supported by decibel, the Arts Council England, Asians in Media and Air India, the event drew approximately 150 people to the ICA to hear a diverse and international group of scholars, journalists and artists grapple with the notion of 'South Asianness'. The term has achieved wide currency today and appears to have become the preferred descriptor when referring to the dances, literatures, cultures, even people, originating from these regions (ie. South Asian countries which are not, otherwise, in a formal or informal, economic or political block). Following the success of its *South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped!* conference at the Royal Opera House in March 2002, Akademi wanted to examine the very idea of 'South Asianness': a concept that is said to underlie a panoply of cultural, artistic and political products, including identity construction in the diaspora. Dance and the performing arts encompass much more than aesthetic preoccupations - in fact, they are informed and inspired by the complex narratives that power the circuitry of human interaction. In recognition of this, Akademi offered a platform where artistic, political and academic ideas could be freely exchanged, thus broadening the discourse and its audiences along the way.

Through *No Man's Land*, Akademi hoped to raise a number of questions relating to South Asianness, among them:

- Is it a new nationality?
- Is it a convenient catch-all that simultaneously cloaks the political and cultural hegemonies implicit within it?
- Is it just 'Indianness' in disguise?
- How relevant is the term to artistic production?
- How appropriate is its use in describing the diaspora and those of increasingly mixed heritage?

The **aim** of the seminar was to

- critically debate the origin, application and relevance of the idea of South Asianness to the regions and their diaspora

The **objectives** were to

- arrive at an understanding of what South Asianness is
- on the basis of that understanding, accept, recommend or reject its use

The day was divided into two halves, the first, pinioned upon Sunil Khilnani's keynote address exploring the origins of the term 'South Asian', the second, inspired by Andrée Grau's presentation on the negotiation of identity through South Asian dance (see appendix 1 for agenda).

2 Participants

Akademi invited a selection of journalists, academics and artists to share their perspectives on 'South Asianness' (see appendix 2 for full details of participants' biographies). Participants are listed below in order of appearance.

- Shobana Jeyasingh, Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company (chair)
- Sunil Khilnani, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington (keynote speaker)
- Daud Ali, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London (panel member)
- Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *The Independent* (panel member)
- Jeevan Deol, St John's College, Cambridge (panel member)
- Pavan Varma, Nehru Centre (panel member)
- Andrée Grau, Roehampton University of Surrey/AHRB Centre for Cross Cultural Music and Dance Performance (presentation)
- Keith Khan, motiroti (panel member)
- Sanjay Sharma, School of Cultural & Innovation Studies, University of East London (panel member)
- Parminder Vir, Carlton Television (panel member)
- Sanjoy Roy, *The Guardian* (panel member)

3 Summary of the day's proceedings

3.1 Chair's introduction

Following a welcome by the ICA's director Philip Dodd, **Shobana Jeyasingh** mapped out the landscape of the day's discussions, presenting her own perspective on the notion of 'South Asianness'. Recalling her reaction to the application of the phrase 'South Asian arts' to her own work, Jeyasingh thought it 'less contentious' (compared to 'ethnic arts'), resting as it did 'safely in the objective arms of geography'. However, being 'pinned down' within such a rubric was discomfiting for Jeyasingh, causing her to 'wriggle' creatively, an exercise she identified as a 'supremely diasporic ritual.'

Jeyasingh asked whether the idea of South Asianness provided a 'welcome coherence' to an otherwise rambling, hugely variegated collection of cultures and expressions, or whether it didn't replace 'colonial reductionism' with an equally simplistic one of its own. Ultimately, said Jeyasingh, for those dwelling in the diaspora, at least, the question was: 'Do we recognise ourselves in this term?'

3.2 Keynote address: No man's land - locating South Asianness

'What is South Asian?', asked **Sunil Khilnani**. The question was posed within the context of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy's own puzzlement, at the beginning of the 20th century, over what actually united the peoples of India. For Coomaraswamy, the answer lay in aesthetics, but for Khilnani this was merely a romanticised notion of India. 'Is there such a key today, in the face of new doubts

and incitements?', he asked. 'And will that key fit to unlock not just the magic puzzle of India, but this exponentially more mysterious agglomeration called South Asia?'

'South Asia', continued Khilnani, is a 'bureaucrat's phrase' lacking the poetry of, say, 'Europe', or, indeed, 'India'. Rather than in mythological legend, its genealogy lies in US foreign policy and the Cold War. According to Khilnani

In the US map of the world, post-partition India came to be designated South Asia, and its new states were clubbed with the Near East (again a State Departmentism), to form the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. Exactly what South Asia encompassed has always had some indeterminacy to it. Even after the creation of a separate Bureau of South Asian Affairs within the State Department (which only happened in the early 1990s), debate has continued over which countries exactly to include

The term gradually gained currency through the field of 'area studies' (a product of the 1950s) eventually crossing into the UK. However, the root of its popularity lay in the region's identification as a security problem (note Bill Clinton's description of South Asia as 'the most dangerous place in the world' following India and Pakistan's nuclear tests at the end of the 1990s):

by containing division and rivalry, 'South Asia' conjured the idea of a common space of community - perhaps temporarily in abeyance - that seemed to transcend national boundaries, and promised a kind of eirenic description and identity for a subcontinent that seemed in reality to be riven by national, religious, ethnic and other divisions. Superbly anodyne, it seems to offer a benign transcendence of these conflicts. As a term of self-description, for members of the diaspora, 'South Asian' might also be seen as a gesture toward safety

Khilnani provided a brief sketch of the political structures of those countries commonly understood to comprise South Asia, noting that the region hosts 'virtually the entire spectrum of possible relationships between culture and the state.' Military dictatorship, parliamentary democracy, monarchy, democratic republicanism - all of these forms are represented within South Asia. But to Khilnani, India held the key to the perfect balance between culture and state, for only in India

is the state not assigned to any single cultural group - it does not claim to be the vehicle of any majority or minority, and its legitimacy lies in the fact that it is regularly and openly contested for through democratic means; though it, too, has from time to time faced challenges to its legitimacy.

India, in its openness to 'the possibility that different stories and ideas of Indianness could enter into it and direct its doings' meant that diversity - the expectation that individuals carry with them multiple allegiances - could thrive within its rubric. Khilnani saw in the idea of India the image of a 'composite culture' where

there is no single body, no singular image or snapshot that can be held up as a cultural norm. Instead all there is is an album or portfolio of images, across which there runs a family resemblance.

It is this composite (which is rooted in politics and not Coomaraswamy's aesthetics), implies Khilnani, that should form the basis of one's understanding of South Asia and South Asianness, and it is from here that the term can gain some kind of poetic credibility. But, noted Khilnani, equally important, particularly when faced with a 'bleaching globalisation' that packages diversity and sells it back to us 'in our own vernacular forms and languages', is the need for privacy.

in this age of explaining ourselves, commodifying our histories and artistic traditions, and selling them on ebay, our diverse cultures also enrich themselves by privacy ... creativity cannot be state-mandated. Rather, it too needs a kind of privacy, outside the ministrations of the state.

(See appendix 3 for full text of the speech.)

3.3 Panel 1 - Claiming new ground - settlers, nomads or fugitives? (Daud Ali, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Jeevan Deol, Pavan Varma)

Panel members offered their perspectives on the subject of South Asianness, referring briefly to Sunil Khilnani's keynote address. (note: Panel members were unable to offer a prepared response to the address as it was not made available to them prior to the event.)

Daud Ali spoke of two 'zones of engagement' with the idea of South Asianness: the diasporic and the subcontinental. However, in both, the trend over the past 15 years had been to gradually move away from a pan-regional identity in favour of 'restricted ethnic, national and religious concerns.' Considering issues of 'identity and political culture, beyond the formal relations of state and communities', Ali dismissed the suggestion that there might be a 'distinct "South Asian" quality which can be apprehended, or politically used.' While Ali conceded that the term 'South Asianness' could usefully circumvent 'narrow nationalism', he added that it also contained 'a certain ineffectualness, because it attempts to do just this by closing its eyes to it.' Asking whether there might be a South Asian way of understanding philosophy, ethics or aesthetics, Ali concluded that 'such approaches greatly impoverish the rich aesthetic traditions of the region by subjecting them to stupefyingly simple dynamics of ethnic/national authenticity.' As such, he called for a resistance to any idea of South Asianness.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown began with a disclaimer, casting herself as 'a fake' with 'no right to speak about South Asia at all'. Born and brought up in East Africa, Alibhai-Brown admitted, however, a 'craving for essentialised identities' amongst East African Asians, which compelled her, at least, toward India. Despite a dismal first encounter with the country, Alibhai-Brown returned to India and was suddenly, and unexpectedly, claimed as an NRI. This, and other experiences, led her, to her astonishment, to 'fall in love with the place'. This, she argued, contradicted Khilnani's assertion that politics held the key to South Asia (and India). '[S]omething exists beyond the politics that is deep and ancestral,' she continued,

'it wasn't the diversity of India ... but some primeval connection with this thing called "culture"'. Alibhai-Brown found this confusing and difficult to reconcile with her fight against the 'tyranny of multiculturalism' and the 'strangle-hold of authenticity' (the idea that one is forced to retain a pure form of authenticity that 'white' people could visit from time to time). The choices in this country, according to Alibhai-Brown, 'are either you seek this stifling authenticity and the multicultural ghettos ... or become the consumer/seller of Bollywood kitsch.' As an example, she commented on the narrowing view of India that was imported to the UK in the form of the Neasden temple. This, said Alibhai-Brown, was 'the most backward moment' for Asians in Britain.

Starting from the personal, **Jeevan Deol** defined himself as a 'multiple migrant', who, unlike Alibhai-Brown, 'never felt fake'. He saw himself firmly as one who was born Canadian, but who chose to be British with 'no hyphenations or negotiations'. Deol firmly opposed the idea of 'South Asian' or 'South Asianness', seeing it as 'code for people who are unable or uncomfortable in talking about race or colour to talk about it without actually using the terms'. He questioned Khilnani's basic assertion that South Asia was defined as a regional block by US foreign policy, pointing out that in the US Department of Defense's map of areas of command, Pakistan and Afghanistan are covered by CentCom, while India, Sri Lanka, Burma, etc are relegated to SouthCom. So, 'for application of force and power, South Asia is not a single entity.'

Turning to a less lofty understanding of the term, Deol described certain superficial (and amusing commonalities), such as the cleaning of tongues and the need to address most family friends as 'aunty' or 'uncle'. At a more political level, however, he saw the use of the term as 'an act of dishonesty', perpetrated as 'a game of elision, for political and numerical gain'. On the one hand, said Deol, it meant 'give me money', but on the other, it revealed the 'inability of the left to deal with diversity by any other means than labelling it, putting it in a box, othering it and keeping it just as far away as the people we like to slam on the Right do'. In terms of representational politics in the UK, the use of the term 'elides citizenship and belonging in favour of what is essentially a racial block'. 'South Asian', according to Deol, did nothing to break down the 'hard-edged set of identities' that had been reinforced by 1960s migration policies which encouraged the wholesale reproduction of village identities in the UK or Canada. To Deol, a 'better tool to dissolve these identities' in this country was the use of the term 'Britishness'.

Pavan Varma found the discussion of 'South Asianness' problematic as it presupposed a 'unifying force'. While he conceded that there were some unifying principles: 'the commonality of the colonial experience, a shared civilisational heritage, a shared geographical space, all of which create something that could be called South Asian,' there were also some very important differences that needed 'to be celebrated though not deified'. To Varma, the crucial question was: 'who are we?'. Answering this question, he noted, was a difficult task because of the stereotypes foisted on India and South Asia by foreigners and the 'myths we ourselves indulge in'. For instance, though India is commonly understood to be the world's largest democracy, its people are not 'intrinsically democratic'. In fact, they are 'intrinsically hierarchical'; democracy was simply a way of moving up that hierarchy. Regarding India's reputation for spirituality, Varma noted that the

country's preoccupation with religion did not preclude its people from having their 'feet on the ground and eye on the balance sheet'. Nor, continued Varma, is India an exceptionally tolerant place.

Pan-Indianism, according to Varma, is one of the most potent forces affecting South Asia today, through common symbols conveyed mainly through the media. At the same time, there is a threat in terms of the homogenising influences of globalisation. To counter this, especially within the context of the arts, Varma called for 1. honesty and scrutiny beyond the labels we are used to; 2. preservation and promotion of that which requires such attention; and 3. the ability to develop our abilities toward change and evolution.

Discussion

Following the panel presentations, panel members offered some brief concluding comments. Discussion, for the most part, concerned the recent Indian elections and the discomfort amongst some in the diaspora over the prospect of having a 'foreign' leader of the country. When discussion opened to the floor, comments and questions relating to the utility of the term South Asianness and the issue of race came to the fore. Some of the main points raised during the session are as follows.

- Jeevan Deol felt that **Sonia Gandhi** was obviously a South Asian given her Indian citizenship. But the constant querying of her 'South Asianness' led him to ask, 'how do we define South Asianness?' Daud Ali agreed, stating that there was 'an interesting discourse about India and Indianness circulating currently'. Sunil Khilnani noted that the Indian constitution does not specify that you have to be anything other than an Indian citizen to hold higher office.
- Yasmin Alibhai-Brown reiterated her preference for a South Asian identity as opposed to the other identities that **multiculturalism** has promoted, saying, 'It's a ghetto, but a more interesting, messy and bigger ghetto than the other narrower ones.' Her sentiments were echoed by a representative of the Young Sindhi Adults who felt uncomfortable about identifying herself as Pakistani because of its conflation with Islam (having explained that the Sindhis had lost their land during the partition of India) and welcomed the term 'South Asian' to avoid being identified with 'a country that had been divided purely for political purposes'.
- Alibhai-Brown and Deol were accused of ignoring **race and class**, and simplifying community politics. To this, Alibhai-Brown responded that 'racism doesn't define South Asian identity politics' and the answers were not to be found in 'talking endlessly about white racism and privileging community politics'. 'If we're going to talk about race,' said Deol, 'then talk about it rather than using these geopolitical terms.'
- On the question of whether the adoption of **single identities** wasn't self-defeating, Deol replied that there was always a 'primary marker' that one would embrace according to a given situation.

- Daud Ali pointed out that 'Indianness' was a problematic **homogenising** force and any discussion of 'American' culture, 'European' culture, indeed 'South Asian' culture was disingenuous and ultimately useless.

3.4 Presentation: A sheltering sky? - Negotiating identity through South Asian dance¹

Andrée Grau explored the processes of classification and labelling, asking what social, cultural and political constructs ultimately underlie something as deceptively simple as a name. Focusing on dance, Grau noted how the 'western classification of dance into art, popular, folk, classical or primitive, says more about the West's views on class, power relations and race than about dance per se'. The exercise is even more revealing when applied to non-Western dance forms. 'Different emphases are given depending on whether individuals are perceived to be aligned or non-aligned with a "mainstream" artistic practice', said Grau, with the effect that the former would be 'understood as transnational if not a-cultural' (eg. ballet) while the latter would 'receive a "cultural treatment"'. (eg. bharata natyam). Offering the example of Joann Keali'inohomoku's 'An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance' (1969), Grau revealed that this anthropological deconstruction of ballet continues to be a shock to many dance students today. Yet, bharata natyam, which is as transnational a form as ballet, 'remains rooted for many in a specific image of an ancient Indian classical high culture'.

Grau turned next to an examination of 'Indian dance(r)' and 'South Asian dance(r)', asking: when does a name/label become a limitation and by extension a liability? Recalling the political motives behind replacing the 'Indian' label with 'South Asian', she conceded that the latter could be perceived as more 'neutral'. 'South Asian dance', said Grau,

... irons out difference and foregrounds similarities. Within a diasporic context, one could argue that it also removes the dance from a notion of clear-cut lineage and a nostalgic notion of lost heritage

Yet, she continued, many have difficulty with the term, precisely because of its monolithic, homogenising connotations. Difference is ignored, and individual choice is somehow erased, rendering the term 'almost like a prison and therefore more a hindrance than a support.' Still, Grau's research revealed a willingness on the part of most artists to 'articulate their engagement with the monolithic label "South Asian dance" because of its expediency'. However, this willingness was accompanied by an awareness of the heterogeneity implicitly encompassed within the term. (See appendix 4 for full text of presentation.)

3.5 Film: *Dancing Divinities* (Dir: Lisa Chandarana)

¹ This presentation was based on Andrée Grau's research report, *South Asian Dance in Britain - Negotiating Cultural Identity Through Dance* (University of Surrey Roehampton, 1999 - 2001)

As part of her presentation, Grau screened an excerpt from Lisa Chandarana's film *Dancing Divinities* to further illustrate the tendency of some to conflate culture and ethnicity with the practice of 'non-mainstream' art forms. The footage showed interviews with bharata natyam, kathak and contemporary dancers of both South Asian and non-South Asian backgrounds. As the following selection of quotes will illustrate, the interviews raised questions of authenticity and identity, highlighting some of the challenges faced by practitioners of South Asian dance forms.

I was told ... 'It's such a shame that you're white, why don't you use tea bags or varnish to change the colour of your skin? Then you'd look really authentic.'
- Magdalene Gorringer, bharata natyam dancer

People look at you and think, that black guy does North Indian dance well, doesn't he? I've even had someone from the audience say, 'You've performed that just like an Indian person', and I thought, how does an Indian person perform that? It's like you have to justify yourself even more because you're not Indian.
- Andrew Obaka, kathak dancer

This idea of authenticity comes, a lot of the time, from a point of view of ignorance. ... [It's] as if the whole thing falls apart because you don't have a certain eye colour. - Noni Jenkyn Jones, kathak dancer

You yearn for a kind of validity, especially when you're not completely Asian, of being accepted within the context of the form.
- Mavin Khoo, bharata natyam/ballet dancer

I was interested in working initially in two different dance forms: the contemporary and the classical Indian. ... It's less about the cultures and it's more about the dance. So it may ... appear that I've just taken a single hand gesture and stuck it on the end of my arm, but if that's what it looks like then I'm not doing my job very well.
- Liz Lea, contemporary dancer

An authentic dancer of any discipline is one who is dedicated to her art, strives to understand it, and can practice it as fully as possible. I don't think that authenticity is necessarily about lineage or some idea of a purity of a style. I think that those kinds of ideas can be very stultifying in themselves and can make an art form isolated and stagnate. - Veena Ramphal, bharata natyam dancer

3.6 Panel 2 - Wild blue yonder: art, identity and representation beyond borders (Keith Khan, Sanjay Sharma, Parminder Vir, Sanjoy Roy)

Identity as a fluid category

Keith Khan punctuated his discussion of identity and cultural spaces with video extracts of motiroti's work. 'I'm interested in how identities are broken down around us,' said Khan, 'so I'm not interested in singular identities. ... I'm very interested in how we're negotiating our culture in all sorts of ways and the way that aspects of our personalities are being commodified.' He identified our ability

'to picture ourselves in the way that we would like to be' as a 'post-Millennial trait', adding that notions of 'country', 'heritage' and indeed 'cultural identity' were fast becoming redundant. He noted, however, that racism and disparity are distinct realities, particularly in terms of funding.

To illustrate his points concerning the fluidity of identity, Khan turned to Akademi's *Escapade* and *Alladeen*, motiroti's latest project which explored the relocation of call centres to Bangalore and 'how people in India are being forced to identify themselves with European and American identities.' But he saw this as a way of thinking about identity the other way round, where 'Indian people are given the power ... [to create] a snapshot of the US'. To illustrate his point, Khan played a clip from *Alladeen* in which call centre workers revealed their aliases and real names. For Khan, *Alladeen* 'was a way of working with my aesthetic without it being culturally derivative - if I stayed in this country, I was doomed to making pieces that were ... skeletally fixed around my identity and therefore brittle and liable to break'.

Khan felt that culture was opening up so that people's idea of entertainment spaces had shifted. 'In those open spaces, there's more cultural fluidity because people are not forced into a ... way of thinking ... they're allowed to be themselves'. For motiroti, continued Khan, the focus was on making work for those kinds of spaces rather than 'places such as this' (ie. the ICA) where 'the desire for us to act out our ethnicity' was all too palpable.

South Asian difference enters the 'white' space

Sanjay Sharma unearthed the deeper theoretical structure beneath labels such as South Asianness, highlighting the tension between striving for universality within a racialised culture and, once the 'white' space has been entered, negotiating that relationship without surrendering to an authenticity advocated by the dominant culture. 'One of the burdens of being marked as 'ethnic', said Sharma, 'is that we're made particular; we can only speak from our particular experiences from our particular, racialised marked bodies.' This, noted Sharma, was what South Asian artists have to struggle against if they are to transcend the particular and claim universality.

Recognising that superficially, at least, Asian art appears to be 'defining the face of multicultural art today' (eg. Monica Ali, Talvin Singh, *Bombay Dreams*, etc), Sharma asked: 'Does that mean the coolie has become cool?' The answer, of course, was 'no'. Greater numbers were not, in themselves, enough to transform 'institutions of whiteness'. Orientalism, pointed out Sharma, 'harbours a racism of inclusion' where 'otherness is integrated into a white norm' and measured against it to see how it deviates from it. But whether seen as wholly 'other'/traditional or 'hybrid'/cool (and therefore acceptable), Sharma felt that there was always an underlying authenticity demanded of both. He also added that hybridity was based on an 'unproblematic' meeting of difference, and proposed a different kind of hybridity 'produced in the grating of different cultural elements'. This 'demotic multiculturalism', as Sharma put it, is 'edgy, resistant, not easy to live with' and reflects the experience of those at the 'blunt end of racism' (and the lower classes) who encounter difference, but are 'not compelled to know, translate or dominate the other'.

However, Sharma's central preoccupation lay with what happens when Asian difference enters 'white' spaces. Claiming that identities are fluid is 'banal', according to Sharma. Though we may wish to make identity a matter of personal

choice, the reality is that identity is an act of 'collective struggle'. What we need to do, said Sharma, is keep asking

how identity is played out in certain institutional spaces. What kind of political agencies has South Asian art produced ... how does it disrupt its own internal hegemonies of class, gender and sexuality? Most importantly, how does it enter into 'white' spaces? Does it de-centre structures of whiteness or is it becoming increasingly complicit with them?

Media (TV) representations of South Asianness

Parminder Vir surveyed the evolution of broadcast media representations of South Asianness within the context of political/racial struggle in the UK. Targetted programming (the BBC's Asian unit) coincided with a tendency in the 1970s to see racial prejudice as a source of entertainment. It was 'not until the 80s and 90s,' said Vir, 'that we began to take control of the means of production'. But, she stressed, this was not a 'sudden wake-up call' for television. Rather, it was a product of the inner city riots, the youth movements, the 'Black and Asian Unite and Fight' struggles personified by Darcus Howe (journalist) and Shivanandan (Institute of Race Relations). Through this constant challenging of institutions it was obvious that 'we were not going to be silenced'. Rather than go to the Arts Council for funding to create 'fossilised' work, film-makers went to the GLC and were further supported by the Black Film Festival and Third Eye - all important ways of giving ethnic minority artists an independent voice.

To Vir, *My Beautiful Launderette* marked 'the end of political correctness' and the opening up of a new era at the end of the 80s and 90s: what Vir called 'the identity hole'. 'If I stayed in Britain,' said Vir, 'then I'd have to make films about identity.' Instead, she 'took refuge' in the 'Developing World', working with film-makers in Mozambique, Angola, Algeria, Brazil, and many other countries. In doing so, Vir acted out a determination not to be 'limited' by her ethnicity.

Looking at television and film today, Vir felt that South Asians (and South Asianness) had clearly entered the mainstream, for instance, through integrated casting and the development of crossover programming. This demonstrated that broadcasters were beginning to recognise South Asians as a viable market. Still, there were numerous challenges remaining, said Vir, amongst them the need to:

- think outside the identity box and abandon the burden of representation
- embrace our ethnicity as an asset
- connect with our audiences locally and globally
- keep challenging commissioning editors
- see this as a business by taking control of the means of production and means of creative ownership

Mixed race identity

Sanjoy Roy spoke about mixed race identity - drawing on his own experience as a person of Bengali/English heritage - and its effect on the idea of a South Asian identity. Examining how he described himself to others, Roy pointed out that identity 'depends on who is asking and why, as much as on me'. In other words, it 'exists only in context, and is ... shifty'. 'Mixed-race', continued Roy, 'is even less meaningful and more plural than the identity South Asian'. There are many other differences that become veiled beneath the term 'race', because the latter is seen

as the most visible difference. Gender, for instance, affects a mixed-race child's cultural mix, but often this is ignored. 'Mixed culture', said Roy, 'does not map easily onto the idea of mixed race'.

To Roy, mixed-race people are seen 'almost to *embody* some of the ideas, anxieties and hopes that are commonly held about this conjunction.' He provided a list of contradictory perceptions, some of which were:

1. in terms of **culture** -
 - 'you're lost in no man's land, but you're free to explore, invent, imagine, *dream*'
 - you are both things - you have doubled the size of your heritage
 - like a hermaphrodite, you can take your pleasures from both sides
 - you are a conduit/messenger
 - you are an embodiment of decay (like a mule) or an embodiment of regeneration
2. in terms of **race** -
 - you are a person in disguise - 'your phenotype doesn't match your genotype'
 - the more mixed-race people there are the less racism there will be

De-bunking the last point, Roy gave the example of Brazil, where racism has not been lessened in any way despite the fact that the mixed race population outnumbers the white or black populations. 'Mixed race identity', he concluded, 'is partial and shifty ... it can be different things at different times to different people - including to oneself.'

Discussion

Panel presentations were followed by a brief discussion session which included questions related to representation, gender, class, sexuality and multiculturalism. The following are some of the main points raised during the discussion.

- A scientist commented on his experience of having to defend 'himself as a brown person' (ie. carry the **burden of representation**) within a transnational field. He felt that it was difficult to integrate his own identity with his field in such a way as to render South Asianness more current and understandable amongst his colleagues.
- Asked how one could go forward in addressing questions of **gender, sexuality and class**, Keith Khan replied that it was defined by how one viewed culture and art. 'Class, race and gender are all unequal things,' he said, 'none of which have been resolved.' Chair, Shobana Jeyasingh, added that perhaps because, according to Sunil Khilnani, the first attempted constructs of South Asianness were led by aesthetics, questions of race, class and gender didn't normally enter into the discourse. Sanjay Sharma felt that it was difficult to untangle discourses on culture, race and class, noting that a project to disentangle them could only be produced through struggle.

- Nasreen Rehman, member of the audience, commented that the morning's discussion had an **Islamophobic** edge which reflected the current climate in the UK. She also pointed out that the artistic and aesthetic vision of South Asian arts is a very **hegemonised Hindu aesthetic** or, at least, a hegemonic Indian vision.
- Considering **multiculturalism** and its so-called death, one member of the audience asked whether the future lay in celebrating Britishness rather than cultural difference. Responses included the following.
 - Sanjoy Roy replied that the main problem with multiculturalism was its definition of certain positions as representative of certain cultures.
 - Parminder Vir felt that the movement away from the idea of 'Black and Asian unite and fight' has fragmented and eroded the politicisation of ethnic minority presence in the UK. She added that this 'empty celebration of multiculturalism doesn't usually ... equal my political, social, economic and cultural reality of growing up in Britain.'
 - Drawing first on an earlier point, Sanjay Sharma felt that 'all categories of identity and claims to identity are hegemonic' and that the internal hegemonies present within 'South Asianness' had never been criticised. 'A nation-state has to claim a single identity,' he continued. In contrast to this, however, multiculturalism is 'seen as a radical gesture' because it transcends the nation. He concluded that multiculturalism was still 'worth fighting for, as long as it's seen as post-national.'

3.7 Chair's summary of the day's proceedings - Claiming 'No Man's Land'

Shobana Jeyasingh cast her eye to the start of the symposium, recalling Sunil Khilnani's rooting of the term 'South Asian' in US geopolitics. Turning to the first panel, Jeyasingh felt that the debate rested essentially on 'the need for a primary marker' that would not compromise one's understanding of one's sense of self.

South Asian, though unpoetic and not enriched by myth, was sufficiently anodyne to serve as a catch-all phrase. But British would do equally well. Perhaps even better since it did not run the risk of being over essentialist. So Punjabi, Sikh from Ludhiana via Canada if we wanted to be honest (honesty was a key word for this panel) or British if one didn't want to be dishonestly over defined.

Jeyasingh felt that Andrée Grau 'promoted' South Asianness as it 'foregrounded similarity' and gave it context, though it ran the risk of over-simplification. For Jeyasingh, the 'most conclusive image of the South Asian' came from Sanjoy Roy's description of the mixed-race person as a 'new chameleon of a creature who proved contradictory and different at each viewing.'

4 Conclusion

The term 'South Asianness' / 'South Asian' received mainly personal treatments from panel members. Participants debated the origins and application of the term, ultimately offering his or her verdict on its relevance as an identity marker. The morning panel, largely consisting of academics, rooted their interpretations very firmly in geography. The afternoon panel (mainly arts practitioners), while recognising the geographical applications of the term, took their interpretations to a metaphorical level, exploring South Asianness as a concept with fluid boundaries.

What was missing, however, was any serious debate about the internal hegemonies implicit within the term. This would have been dictated, to a large extent, by the India-centric thesis of the keynote speech. However, though opportunities to broaden the geographic (country/cultural) focus did arise, they were often missed. To borrow from Sanjay Sharma, the idea of South Asianness, as advanced by some of the panellists, pretended to be transnationalist when, in fact, it failed to transcend the particular (ie. Indianness - and more precisely, a Hindu Indianness, as one member of the audience pointed out).

At least half the panellists, however, rejected the 'South Asianness' moniker altogether, judging it to be ambiguous, dishonest and ineffectual. Instead, some advocated for more particular (and 'honest') identities (Gujarati, Punjabi, Nepali), others for an identity framed by political/racial struggle ('Black' in terms of its 1970s application under the banner 'Asian and Black unite and fight') and still others for 'Britishness' (to paraphrase: if we're going to adopt a generalist term, why not Britishness as we're living in Britain?).

Those who accepted the term, however, recognised it as an ever-changing, 'multi-headed beast'. As chair Shobana Jeyasingh concluded in her summary of the day, the most apt characterisation of South Asianness could be borrowed from an interpretation of mixed-race identity as a complex and contradictory chameleon.

5 Summary of key points

- According to keynote speaker Sunil Khilnani, the term 'South Asian' was conceived by the US State Department in the Cold War era to designate the area as a security zone. As such, the term itself was problematised as it referred to a potentially unstable region requiring political containment. Further, it lacked poetry, given its bureaucratic beginnings. If it is to acquire poetry, noted Khilnani, then it needs to look to India's political face (its promotion, according to Khilnani, of the idea that no one culture or image should dominate the other) for inspiration.
- Many panellists resisted the idea of 'South Asianness'. Its reduction of difference to a bland umbrella term was seen as inaccurate and disingenuous. Jeevan Deol, for instance, felt that the term was deployed in service of 'representation politics'- ie. obtaining more funding/power. It also 'elided citizenship and belonging in favour of what is essentially a racial block'. Finally, it revealed the 'inability of the left to deal with diversity by any other means than labelling it ... [and] othering it'. To Parminder Vir, the term contained within it the fragmentation of the politico-racial coalition of the 1970s and represented a backward move that was ineffectual in securing real power.
- Many felt that the term was a preferable compromise, provided the differences contained within it were recognised. 'It's a ghetto,' said Alibhai-Brown, 'but a more interesting ... and bigger ghetto than the ... narrower ones promoted by multiculturalism'. For Grau, the term - at least within the realm of dance - could be seen as more neutral than, say, 'Indian'. 'Within a diasporic context,' she noted, 'one could argue that it also removes the dance from a notion of clear-cut lineage and a nostalgic notion of lost heritage'. The implication was that this might encourage a discourse about dance forms, like bharata natyam, as less rooted in ethnicity and more in technique, thus rendering the form(s) transnational.
- For Keith Khan, terms such as 'South Asian/South Asianness' were essentially redundant; cultural fluidity was the more accurate reflection of reality. But Sanjay Sharma felt that notions of cultural fluidity were 'banal'. Though we may wish to make identity a matter of personal choice, he noted, the reality is that identity is an act of 'collective struggle'. The real question, for Sharma, was what happened to South Asian identity when it entered 'white' spaces (spaces dominated by 'white cultures'): 'how does it disrupt its own internal hegemonies of class, gender and sexuality? ... Does it de-centre structures of whiteness or is it becoming increasingly complicit with them?'
- The most accurate framing of the term (if the term had to be accepted) came from Sanjoy Roy, in his description of mixed-race identity as, to quote chair Shobana Jeyasingh, 'a 'new chameleon of a creature who proved contradictory and different at each viewing.'

No Man's Land - Exploring South Asianness Symposium Report
Shiromi Pinto
June 2004

6 Appendices

Appendix 3

Ica22may04

What is South Asian?

Sunil Khilnani

In the early years of the last century, a young geologist: the son of an English mother and a Ceylonese Tamil father who had been the first Asian to gain a knighthood – a young man raised on the Kentish downs but now living in Kandy – found himself worrying over the question of what, if anything, could possibly unite the peoples of India as a nation. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, to give him his full name, was not of course alone in his puzzlement. Many young men (as they usually were), shipped beyond the shores of India to gain an education, had become mesmerized by this question of what India was – and, more immediately, what made them Indian. Gandhi, Aurobindo, Ambedkar, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah – one can reel off the names: each had to discover for himself where and to whom he belonged.

Men such as Coomaraswamy – who, in his explorations of this question over subsequent decades was to establish himself as one of the 20th century's great philosophers and historians of art – were provoked into the question by the challenge thrown to them by their British masters. As John Strachey had declared, late in the 19th century, with lofty emphasis: 'there is not, and never was an India, nor ever any country of India, possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious; no "people of India" of which we hear so much'. The very ingredients – cultural, historical, linguistic – that, according to European ideas, were needed to shape a sense of patriotism or nationalism were unavailable to Indians. 'The Italians', wrote another imperial intellectual, John Seeley, 'had the Roman Republic behind them. It was by reading Livy to the people that Rienzi roused them to rebellion. No Indian demagogue could find anything similar to read to the people'. Thus hampered, lacking the symbology of nationhood, India teetered always on the verge of dissolution into myriad squabbling and self-regarding communities, each lacking any larger identity to which its inhabitants could owe allegiance. In the face of this always-threatening dissolution into cosmic sludge, the only thing that imparted an identity to 'India', that could hold it together, was the carapace of imperial power.

While political figures like Gandhi and Nehru worked to find unifying elements that could yield practical opposition, men like Coomaraswamy looked in other directions. 'The diverse peoples of India,' he wrote in answer to his question, 'are like the parts of some magic puzzle, seemingly impossible to fit together, but falling easily into place when once the key is known'. Ultimately, he decided that the key lay not in race, religion, or language, but in the realm of aesthetics: in a history of artistic shaping that, in his deft and energetic hands, was to be invented and henceforth known as 'Indian Art' – one whose distinctive quality was seen to lie in its spiritual concerns.

Coomaraswamy and many others who like him were engaged in the effort to resolve the puzzle of India in the years before India became the name of a nation state (when it named the subcontinent) have bequeathed to the South Asian intellectual tradition a rich discussion and directory of choices – a range of ways of thinking about who we are and of what we might hope or fear to be. Though differing in fundamental respects, these nation-stories shared a romantic and expressivist bent. They chose to see the subcontinent's diversities as, in fact, an expression or emanation of a singular spirit, essence or idea. Empirical, ever-visible differences were simply manifestations of inner, deeper commonalities; and individuals were simply vehicles of an abstract Indianness, of a religious,

ethnic, linguistic or even spiritual identity. Such romanticism was of course a direct and irritated riposte to the British view that the region possessed no internal unity, but was merely an assemblage of castes, tribes, races, religions, languages, artefacts, and myths that had to be held together by external political power. In a sense, English nominalism inspired a wave of essentialism in the region from which it departed.

Is there such a key today, in the face of new doubts and incitements? The incitements are various and come from the direction of global seductions, as well as from the region's fermenting nationalisms. And will that key fit to unlock not just the magic puzzle of India, but this exponentially more mysterious agglomeration called South Asia? That intellectual tradition to which I've just referred, of whom I think Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru are by far the most important [figures]*, contains a sharp and still-living way of addressing such questions: questions which force us to think about the relationship between culture and politics.

I

'South Asia' is a flat term – a bureaucrat's phrase. India and Europe are both names that contain poetry, that embody stories, and that trail behind them often self-contradictory myths of origin. In the case of Europe, its founding myths suggest not a great common origin, but the ragged inconsistencies of its past. As Anthony Pagden has put it in an essay on the idea of Europe, 'An abducted Asian woman [Europa] gave Europe her name; a vagrant Asian exile [Aeneas] gave Europe its political and finally its cultural identity; and an Asian prophet [Jesus] gave Europe its religion'. In the case of India, we find a rich repertoire of terms that work on the imagination, beginning with names for the land, names which themselves embody entire narratives: from the Rigvedic *sapta sindhu* (Sindhu/Indus and its seven tributaries), to *aryavarta* (the gangetic plain), *Hindustan* (referring mainly to the North West), the Arab *al-Hind* (the land beyond the Indus), *Bharatvarsha*, not to mention *jambudvipa* (land of the rose-apple tree) and others.

'South Asia', by contrast, is a term of supreme artificiality – indeed a bureaucrat's term. As far as I can determine, it was not used before 1947, and had no currency in British usage: the British referred simply to India, and created for their dealings with the subcontinent the India Office, separate from the Foreign and Colonial Office which administered the rest of the empire. 'South Asia' as a name was born out of modern geopolitics: specifically, the strange cartography of the US State Department in the early years of the Cold War.

In the US map of the world, post-partition India, came to be designated South Asia, and its new states were clubbed with the Near East (again a State Departmentism), to form the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. Exactly what South Asia encompassed has always had some indeterminacy to it. Even after the creation of a separate Bureau of South Asian Affairs within the State Dept (which only happened in the early 1990s), debate has continued over which countries exactly to include – so that, for instance, in addition to Afghanistan, some have advocated including also the Central Asian Republics.

From this US diplomatic coinage, it seems the usage entered into the academic world, finding new popularity in the field of 'area studies' that began to emerge in the 1950s – a field itself funded heavily by the US government and foundations like Ford and Rockefeller as part of the US effort to prosecute the Cold War. Within 'area studies' as developed in the US, South Asia tended to be defined in various ways: as a linguistic and literary area, a cultural and civilizational one, and as a security area. In the early decades of South Asia area

* Text in square brackets, unless otherwise indicated, refers to material inserted by report author/editor.

studies, practised most vigorously at [the University of] Chicago, inquiry focused on identifying what were taken to be the defining characteristics of this region: Sanskrit language, the social order of caste, Hindu religion, folk traditions. Some effort was put in towards trying to identify the 'South Asian Mind'— part of the larger interest in the 'Asian Mind', and its curious ways of operating: work that has contemporary equivalents in the more demotic writings of Richard Nesbitt ('The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently ... and why') and Kishore Mahbubani ('Can Asians Think?'), whose latest analyses are piled high for sale at Singapore airport. It was from these academic researches that the term began to gain wider currency, especially in the US; and as the US has come, in the last 15-20 years to displace Britain in quality and extent of research on the region, the term arrived in Britain too.

But what really seems to have accelerated the dissemination of the term was its use in relation to South Asia seen as a security area during the Cold War, and then in the wake of the nuclear tests of the late 1990s by India and Pakistan. These tests prompted Bill Clinton's now-famous description of South Asia as 'the most dangerous place in the world'. Politically, from the US point of view, South Asia was the name for a security problem which required the constant management and intervention of the US. In the past, it was Britain that took on the role of – as it saw it – peacekeeper among the feuding castes and religions of India; now it was the US among the nations of South Asia.

And, precisely by containing division and rivalry, 'South Asia' conjured the idea of a common space of community – perhaps temporarily in abeyance – that seemed to transcend national boundaries, and promised a kind of eirenic description and identity for a subcontinent that seemed in reality to be riven by national, religious, ethnic and other divisions. Superbly anodyne, it seems to offer a benign transcendence of these conflicts. As a term of self-description, for members of the diaspora, 'South Asian' might be seen also as a gesture toward safety – a way to enlarge our numbers and our influence in the farflung places we now live. The term seems to promise a commonality that is elusive, if not fictive – a way of transcending the embarrassment of nationalism. [[In Britain, where plain 'Asian' had tended to be used, we saw a break down of the term in 2001, during the riots in Oldham.]]** It's a term that tries to wish away the relationship between politics and culture, which is central to the term's meaning, as it is to the region it now names. I'd like now to turn to this.

II

As a name that refers to a part of the world, South Asia names an experiment, in part unintended, in part conscious. That experiment has been based on the recognition, the necessary acknowledgment, of the puzzle – and political challenges – posed by the 'diverse peoples' of the region, and the differing extents to which this has been given expression. South Asia's history over the past 60 years or so represents a particularly intense set of efforts aimed at working out the relationship between culture and politics under modern conditions – which means, in effect, under the sign of the modern state. The historical products of these efforts is borne out by the presence in South Asia today of virtually the entire spectrum of possible relationships between culture and the state. And we also find in the region pretty much the full spectrum of modern regime forms. This variety is striking – I don't think we can find anything like this profusion anywhere else in the world, and certainly not on the South Asian scale, which encompasses 1.4 billion people.

What these facts – the multiple alignments between cultural content and political form across the subcontinent, and its differing regime forms – immediately reveal (what I think

** Author's note.

they are symptomatic of) is the immensely awkward struggle to get the vast cultural diversities that inhabit this part of the world somehow to fit with the ideas, practices and institutions of modern politics. The last six decades represent the history of a search for political forms across a subcontinent that contains the world's largest number of Hindus and Muslims, as well as many millions of Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and animist worshippers – a search for political forms which can at once contain and express this diversity.

These facts and their implications can, I think, tell us important things about the possibilities for cultural diversity, and for its legitimate, durable forms in this part of the world. Take first the relationship between culture and the state, and how this has been arranged in the different countries of the region, and the regime forms that have managed these arrangements. I'll restrict my remarks to those countries that identify themselves as South Asian (ie. SAARC) countries: but if, say, Afghanistan and Burma were also included, my point would be even further reinforced.

In Pakistan, the legitimacy of the state is seen to rest on its belonging to the religious majority, though the regime is a military dictatorship whose popular legitimacy is doubtful. In Bangladesh, the state's legitimacy rests on its ownership by a linguistic/cultural majority: and the state claims to represent this majority through a somewhat erratic democratic regime. In Sri Lanka, the ownership of the state is supposed to rest with the Sinhala majority, an ethnic majority, which is given expression through a democratic regime: but this is in active dispute from the Tamil minority. Nepal is a Hindu-majority state ruled by a Hindu king – a monarchical state whose legitimacy as a homogenous community is being contested by a Maoist insurgency as well as popular pressures for democracy. In Bhutan, a Buddhist king rules over a Buddhist population that he is careful to keep insulated from the world outside. In the Maldives, an ethnic minority (South Indian origin) long dominated a limited parliamentary regime, winning much resentment for that. Only in the largest of the South Asian countries, India, is the state not assigned to any single cultural group: it does not claim to be the vehicle of any majority or minority, and its legitimacy lies in the fact that it is regularly and openly contested for through democratic means, though it too has from time to time faced challenges to its legitimacy.

We have, then, a set of states, each of which has tried to connect power and identity, politics and culture, in differing ways. How well have they done, both for their self-claimed cultures and for their own viability as states; what have been the effects on culture and on the state? It's worth considering this question with some candour, if we are to assess the life-chances for cultural diversity in this part of the world.

I'll be somewhat schematic in my remaining remarks, not least in order to provoke discussion. Underlying this variety of models and state forms, are, I think, two contrasting logics, one more familiar to us, the other less so. The first is a model of the nation state that conforms to the logic of the European model. From this point of view, the best way to maintain cultural identities and to allow them free expression is if there is a tight fit between the identities of state and people: if the state aligns itself with a homogenous nation – whether that was defined by religion, language or ethnicity – the defining content of the nation is variable. This was a thoroughly modernist view, articulated by 19th century European nationalism. It has provided the inspiration for most of the states of South Asia that emerged after the withdrawal of European empire.

This model and its logic enter South Asia with a bang in 1947, with the creation of Pakistan – a modern state that founded itself on explicitly religious principles, and saw itself as the state of a homogenous people with common interests, the first Islamic nation state in the world. A similar view could be seen among certain Hindu groups, too, who argued that political unity must be found to rest in a common culture derived from religion. Apart from

Jinnah, others who took up this view included Savarkar, with his view of Hindutva which defined the cultural content of a Hindu nation – a ‘galactic Hindu empire’ as he called it; also the Sikhs, and even for a brief moment, Ambedkar and the lower castes, who floated the idea of a Dalitstan, a territorial nation for India’s outcastes. It is also this logic that underpins almost all of the other states of South Asia. It’s a position that is mistrustful of diversity, in two senses: it voices a desire not to be part of a larger, diverse unit, and equally a wish to minimize internal diversity within the boundaries of such a state. Cultural diversity, especially when subject to the calculus of majorities and minorities, was seen as a weakness and a threat. In this view, the subcontinent contained within itself a multiplicity of cultural groups, ‘nations’, each of which was entitled to its own territorial homeland. South Asia would thus be a land containing many bounded nation states, homogenous in character. Pre-partition India in this conception represented not a subcontinental civilization, as, say, a Tagore, Gandhi, or Coomaraswamy may have romanticized, but a territory that contained many nations, waiting to attain their own statehood.

In contrast to this logic, the founding idea of India was considerably more unusual, both in conception and in execution too. Indeed, to many external observers, it looked much more fragile and unlikely to succeed in staying together. The other South Asian models of the nation state appeared stronger and more durable, in the face of the evident arbitrariness of Indian borders – arbitrary because it simply brought within one state a huge variety of cultural identities. This arbitrariness is of course often the subject of criticism, particularly from those who would pursue an apparently more authentic relationship between culture and state: territory. But what may be lost in alleged authenticity by so defining the relationship between culture and territory is more than made up for in frankness.

At the core of the Indian idea was a refusal of the belief that India’s various religious/linguistic/ethnic groups, ie. its cultural substance, inevitably formed communities whose common interests were defined by their cultural identities. It certainly recognised the presence of such communities, and did not seek to efface them in the hope that it could replace them with some other cultural content. Indeed, such recognition was written into the constitutional order of the new state. But it did not assign cultural groups priority in defining the form and ownership of the state.

The state that was established in 1947 had a degree of openness to the possibility that different stories and ideas of Indianness could enter into it and direct its doings. It’s an important point to register, because it is in the nature of a democratic society to produce different stories that can and will rise up to the surface, as different groups seek – under different self-descriptions – to appropriate for themselves the coercive powers of the state and use these for their own purposes.

From the 1950s onwards, those in charge of the state did for their own part try to implant a certain story about India. They did this in various ways: by politics, by development, and by attempted indoctrination. This was accomplished both by daily reminders – eg. All India Radio, and by annual spectacle, eg. Republic Day Parades – where India processed as a pageant of composed and ordered differences. The epic, lyrical poetry of earlier imaginings of India was transcribed into the governmental prose of building a ‘composite India’.

And yet, during these years, this was never a monolithic or all-encompassing project. There remained significant space for variety to flourish within India. The state loomed large in many aspects of public life; it certainly tried in some ways to manufacture a ‘national culture’ through all the usual methods: museums, institutions and so on. But it was an important feature of all these efforts that the state did not try to impose a uniform definition of a national culture; it did not molest local loyalties, or gerrymander them into new shapes –

although it did frequently try to persuade such loyalties to adopt wider horizons. It respected the element of choice – for religions, regions and languages and above all for individuals – in deciding the matter of how to be Indian. While it certainly took seriously the need, as a state, to maintain territorial boundaries, it was not fixated on trying to regiment the cultural content of the nation. It recognized that its citizens might choose to maintain simultaneous allegiance to a variety of things – nation, region, religion, language – and such loyalties were not seen as necessarily competitive or exclusive ones.

This achievement was often described in terms of a 'composite culture', a much abused term. This can mean two significantly different things. It can mean a culture spatch-cocked together from different contexts: a collage of bits and pieces designed to produce what the Hindu nationalist BJP has referred to as 'one nation, one people, one culture'. The result in this case is like one of those 'exquisite corpses' that children so love to draw – where each child completes one part of the body, without knowing what the other has drawn, thereby producing a beast at once grotesque and hilarious. Or one might understand a composite culture to mean that there is no single body, no singular image or snapshot that can be held up as a cultural norm. Instead all there is is an album or portfolio of images, across which there runs a family resemblance. Thus one might recognize a jawline, a smile, a look – but each individual is singular itself, not the mongoloid product of some strange and coerced coupling.

Although this conception of an Indian identity was informed by the language of western constitutional theory (and in some part articulated in it), and spoke a fluent legal language, in fact its basic intuition about the relationship between political power and the diverse cultural practices of subcontinental society was derived from an insight into the operative principles of the few large-scale political formations of India's past, prior to the coming of the nation state. In its basic understanding and intention, it was a recurrence to an older conception of the relationship between culture and power. It understood that these had been sustained by relatively limited interference by political power in the society's cultural and religious practices: ie. there was always a distance between the political power of the state and social practice.

But, while it kept its distance by, for instance, allowing space for legal pluralism in matters of civil law, it did also establish universal norms – of rights and liberties – upheld in law, intended to provide standards by which members of different cultural and religious communities could assess their own practices and norms which hopefully might push them towards change and reform. Citizenship was defined by civic and universalist, rather than cultural, criteria – whether of a religious, ethnic, etc kind – but the claims of Indians as members of particular communities were also recognised. Consider the examples of language and religion. The tensions and contradictions generated by this duality have filled much of the space of Indian politics in subsequent decades, and have threatened, on occasion, altogether to flood out any other considerations. But it has also made available to Indians a richer repertoire of self-descriptions, over which they can exercise a degree of choice, and which has helped to keep them committed to the democratic game.

This conception was of course a political project, not a permanent acquisition of rational truth, and as such was open to challenge and even to defeat. Precisely because it did not seek to settle once and for all the content of Indianness, it left itself open to contest—and diverse creativity. Of course, that model has in recent years come under political challenge, and it is such challenges that have once again infused an erotic, often bitter, energy into debates over what is Indian today. Lurking behind these challenges are two broad processes.

The first is an impulse within India towards rearranging the relationship between culture and state. We have seen in India a political movement – which has deep historical roots, and which despite a recent electoral setback is not likely to go away soon or quietly –

that wishes to make India more like the rest of South Asia, indeed more like the rest of the world, in terms of the definitional principle of the state order: it wishes to remake the Indian state in the image of a Western nation state. The Hindu nationalist BJP fear is that the Indian state is a 'soft state' – a state that looks too little like a Western one, too little like its neighbour, and too much like, well precisely an Indian one. Their ambition of creating 'One nation, one culture, one people' is indeed a slogan that neighbouring states might recognise, but it is something that India is frustratingly not. This is a yearning to conjure a culturally and ethnically cleaned up, homogenous community with a singular Indian selfhood defined in this case in religious terms. It is a desire, as well, to bring the array of cultural expression under command of the state.

The other process is somewhat vaguer to capture, but likely to be even more powerful in its effects: the pressures of the market, both global and local, which are producing what can be termed either an erasure or commodification of Indianness. The workings of the market in India are creating a pan-Indian class of consumers linked by their common consumption interests. Diversity can now be packaged up and served to us in our own vernacular forms and languages. Fashion, which previously played with ethnic references, now draws upon India's vast mines of kitsch – religious and cinematic – which go down well in the West. Also commodified are domestic ornament, vaastu, astrology, the seeking out of new travel destinations (and the surge of magazines catering to this). These are all signs of a hunger for consuming India, just as India itself is being consumed by globalization – a global consumption of things Indian which India finds it has to feed – selling itself as Brand Bangalore – in order to feed itself.

But both these trends have a common root, in which identity is instrumentalized and made a means to other satisfactions.

III

I have dwelt on the case of India not merely because it looms so large in the region, nor because I am oblivious of how this might be misconstrued in such a forum as this. Rather, I have dwelt on India because I think the logic that underlies the choices it made in how to structure the relationship between culture and politics offers a better alternative than others in dealing both with a bleaching globalization and the desperate, and often self-destructive counterpolitics that emerges in response to globalization's effects – whether in the form of aggressive nationalisms or terrorism.

Against the pressure of every country in our region to connect to so-called global links, I am reminded of a small population of Tibeto-Burman-speaking hunter-gatherers, the Raute, who avoid intercultural communication with surrounding Nepali-speaking agriculturalists except during barter sessions. During these intercultural interactions, Raute often charm their trading partners with Nepali verbal art—reciting rhyming proverbs, singing songs. Not long ago, patient anthropologists discovered that this verbal art was not in fact about sharing crucial bits of their own culture. Rather, the Raute were using language to obscure—the charming rhyming proverbs were a means of camouflaging the Raute people's actual, and unshared, cultural practices.

I take the story of the Raute as a reminder that in this age of explaining ourselves, commodifying our histories and artistic traditions, and selling them on ebay, our diverse cultures also enrich themselves by privacy. One might take as an argument for such necessary privacy – which relies on a distance between state and culture – the absurd counter-example of Singapore, a self-consciously multicultural community and also an authoritarian one. Singapore, even as it projects its cultural variety as a marketable product, also arranges this through a tidy ordering of differences. Today, its leaders believe it faces what they call a

crisis of creativity, and the state itself has mobilized to try to promote a freer form of thinking and aesthetic expression. But creativity cannot be state-mandated. Rather, it too needs a kind of privacy, outside the ministrations of the state.

Which brings me to Coomaraswamy's claim to have discovered the key. If there is such a key to South Asia, it is not aesthetics, nor for that matter religion or culture. Instead, it is that unpretty thing: politics. For a long while now South Asians have had to devise ways of responding to the intrusions of modern politics. Over the past 60 years, the defining story of the region has been one that shows its capacity to structure this politics in the form of a large-scale democratic state. This has created space not just to sustain diversities but to express them. Diversity of course is not an absolute good in itself, to be preferred simply for its own sake. Diversities are valuable to the extent that they reflect and enable our capacity to choose – to critically discriminate about who we wish to be.

If the idea of South Asia is to acquire some poetry, it will need to be able to make choices about what political forms best express its diversities. It seems that such an idea of South Asia, which still needs invention and substance, could usefully absorb something from the idea of India I have tried to sketch out.

Appendix 4

A sheltering sky? - Negotiating identity through South Asian dance

(Andrée Grau, Roehampton University of Surrey)

ICA, 22nd May 2004

Abstract:

Dance anthropologists from the late 1960s onward have demonstrated how the western classification of dance into, for example art, popular, folk, classical, or primitive say more about the West's views on class, power relations and race than about dance per se, yet few within the dance world today have taken notice of these debates. Indeed many discussions about dance continue to reveal the speakers' views about dancers/choreographers and their supposed social and cultural identities, rather than an engagement with the structures and artistic elements of the dance forms under scrutiny. People often conflate choreographers' backgrounds and the aesthetic underlying their dance works. Furthermore different emphases are given depending on whether individuals are perceived to be aligned or non-aligned with a 'main stream' artistic practice. Whilst the former often see their oeuvre examined in artistic terms and their work understood as transnational if not a-cultural; in contrast the latter often see their work receive a 'cultural treatment' linking it to notions of heritage and tradition. When does a name/label stop being a metaphorical shelter or refuge and start becoming a limitation (and by extension, a liability)? The presentation will explore some of the notions embedded in labels such as 'Indian dance/dancer' and 'South Asian dance/dancer', framing the discussion within a debate on identity/alterity and inclusion/exclusion

Classification and labelling are part of our daily experience. Visitors entering the grounds of Froebel College at Roehampton where I work, for example, may notice the *Abies larix* along the path. Their brains may register 'tree' as they walk pass it. Without giving the process any thought they have transformed percepts – the environmental stimuli of a unique tree transformed into images received by their brains – into the concept 'tree'. By ignoring some of the *Abies larix*'s attributes, highlighting others and connecting the results with displaced past experiences of similar encounters and with the prototype 'tree' stored in their brains, they have created a link between the tree in front of them and ideas of what constitutes 'tree-ness' in contrast, say, to 'shrub-ness' or 'bush-ness'. If they are botanically inclined they may have registered 'European larch' rather than the more inclusive term 'tree', proceeding in this way towards greater specialisation and exclusion. The whole process took no more than a few seconds.

All of us go through similar experiences thousands of time every day, hardly being aware that we do so, as this is part of the process we go through to make sense of the world surrounding us. This is no different when we meet people. Within minutes we have 'labelled' them based on physical attributes, clothes, posture, tone of voice, accent and so on. Similarly when we see dance, the visual and aural stimuli we receive from the stage are filtered

through a screen of perception. The images and stereotypes stored in our brains enable us to recognise the structured movements presented to us: first as 'dance', then to link them to different genres and subgenres of dance. This screen has been constructed over the years from the way we have been enculturated into our society. In this way our experiences and the labels we apply to them are not neutral but loaded with the values of the social groups we belong to, and one needs to ask the question 'what is in a name?'. I will take the name of our host today as a case in point.

When the institution was first founded in 1979 it was called the *National Academy of Indian Dance*. In 1988 the 'national' was dropped and in 1997 the name became *Akademi (South Asian Dance in the UK)*. In this last rebirth the spelling of academy/akademi was Sanskritised, giving the name a distinct South Asian flavour primarily visually, as aurally in everyday usage by most English speakers there is not much difference, if any at all, between the two. Looking at these name changes every ten years or so, one can identify three main threads dealing respectively with: the notion of nations and nationalities; of academies and what they represent; and of Indian versus South Asian dance. Now I will discuss the academy part. I will tackle the Indian and South Asian part later in my presentation, and the nation bit will be for some other time, though aspects of it will occasionally emerge within the discussion.

Originally the Academy was a garden near Athens, a sacred site dedicated to the hero Academos, where the philosopher Plato taught. It was later used to define any place of learning and it is primarily this usage of the word rather than its link to ancient Greece that underpins the name of our host. Yet useful intellectual parallels can be drawn between India and Greece and the place they have in people's imagination in terms of intellectual heritage; in their respective diaspora, and all the individuals who pledge allegiance to them; as well as in comparisons between Greece's philhellenes and India's Indophiles. Both India and Greece have been in part 'imagined' – in Benedict Anderson's usage of the term – as idealised and intellectual ancestors of respectively Europe and South/South East Asia. Both have reclaimed the past in becoming modern nation-states and both have been seen by some as somewhat passive reincarnations of their ancient selves. For both, this has had implications in terms of representations and in both instances, what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (1987) calls *disemia*, the play of cultural contradictions found in all societies, can reach exquisitely refined heights of irony, be that in a Bavarian queen designing the Greek *fustanella* – the

skirt of the Greek national costume for men – or of Akademi being linked to an institution that labels itself ‘imperial’ for establishing and disseminating syllabi for kathak and bharatanatyam.

Anthropology as an academic discipline strives to articulate the different screens of perceptions, the different world-views created by human beings, and expose the social constructions underpinning classifications, categorisations and labelling. Dance anthropologists specialise in the socio-cultural and historical understanding of the structured human movement systems people chose to label ‘dance’. From the late 1960s onward they have demonstrated, for example, how the western classification of dance into art, popular, folk, classical, or primitive, says more about the West’s views on class, power relations and race than about dance per se, yet few within the dance world today have taken notice of these debates. Indeed, many discussions about dance continue to reveal the speakers’ views about dancers/choreographers and their supposed social and cultural identities, rather than an engagement with the structures and artistic elements of the dance forms under scrutiny. Some dances are somewhat perceived as having an existence independently from the socio-cultural backgrounds of the individuals involved in them; whilst in other cases people conflate the choreographers’ backgrounds and the aesthetic underlying their dance works. Different emphases are given depending on whether individuals are perceived to be aligned or non-aligned with a ‘mainstream’ artistic practice. The former often see their oeuvre examined in artistic terms and their work understood as transnational if not a-cultural; in contrast the latter often see their work receive a ‘cultural treatment’ linking it to notions of heritage and tradition in the case of artists whose families originated outside Europe, or in terms of sexuality for artists who label themselves other than heterosexual, for example.

It is interesting to note, too, who is labelled first, second, third or whatever generation immigrant. How many generations does it take to become integrated? Again, different criteria are applied depending on origin. As an illustration of this attitude the Swiss ethnomusicologist Laurent Aubert occasionally labels himself for journalists as an ‘11th generation political refugee’ (in Rouyer 2004:28) since his Huguenot family fled France to Geneva when the Edict of Nantes, which had been established in 1598 by Henry IV to legalise the Reformed Church, was revoked by Louis XIV in 1685, resulting in about half a million people finding refuge primarily in Switzerland, Germany, Holland and England. Some also went to South Africa and established the wine industry in what was to become the Cape Province. They

were not allowed to speak French and had to inter-marry with Dutch people in order to assimilate. Yet they kept their name, hence the number of French surnames among Afrikaners, e.g. the infamous Terre Blanche of the ultra-right. Our names are our labels, often the first bit of our identity that we choose to share, and the Huguenots chose not to 'Afrikaanise' their names, latching onto a vestige of their past. Again one can ask the question 'what is in a name?'. But I digress; let's go back to Laurent Aubert and his being an '11th generation political refugee'. Being white, his family has been integrated into 'Swiss-ness' for so long that the label '11th generation political refugee' is never used unless facetiously. On the other hand it is likely that people with a similar pedigree to his, but with a brown skin, would still be perceived as 'foreigners' even if along the way they had acquired Swiss citizenship too. Acquiring citizenship, however, does not necessarily mean full integration, as we have seen in recent times with Sonia Gandhi regularly being called 'foreigner' by some members of Indian society. Clearly for some, three decades of engagement in a country is somehow not sufficient to show one's commitment. One could also comment here about the label 'Italian-born' currently used by the UK press for Sonia Gandhi, when, to my knowledge, Prince Philip is rarely if ever labelled as 'Greek-born'. Places of origin are not always important.

Although the concept of 'race' has long been rejected by scientists, racism is still very much part of our everyday life. Last month Trevor Phillips, the head of the Commission for Racial Equality, criticised, in a speech on the place of ethnic minorities in the UK, plans currently being developed by the Manchester education authority which propose to 'open a school in Bangladesh to cater for immigrant parents who often take their children to their home country for [an] extended period' (Ahmed 2004: 9) because these trips are part of the children's learning about their culture. For Phillips, plans such as these are saying to those children 'we don't care where you are born – you are brown, you are still a foreigner, and we will treat you as such' (ibid). Although Manchester education authority undoubtedly means well, and indeed probably has the best interest of the children at heart, it does not escape racist elements deeply embedded in British society. Journalist Michael Eboda tackled similar issues when he told sport commentator Ron Atkinson, after the furore caused by his remarks about the Chelsea footballer Marcel Desailly:

I don't think you are a racist, but I do think you have a racist element in you and I don't think you are aware of what racism is.
No you don't see colour when you are giving a person a job [... but] I don't think that had Desailly been white you would have mentioned his colour. You

might have called him a lazy bastard, but you certainly wouldn't have called him a lazy, white nigger

(Eboda 2004:3)

Ethnicity for most is something that belongs to minorities. In the United Kingdom, as part of our professional lives, we fill many forms supporting ethnic monitoring and affirmative action. Whilst there are many variations under the labels 'Black' and 'Asian', 'White' is generally singular. I am not going to go into details as to why this is so, suffice it to say that when people have been in a position of power for a long time; this becomes a natural state of affairs. Because they hold the reins they have no need for knowing much about the people they have control over.

This was highlighted by Alan Wilmot, a war veteran from the Caribbean, when interviewed by *The Guardian* for an article about the soldiers of the British Empire. Talking about the attitude of people in England towards him and his compatriots, he recalled

The English were very, very curious about us. In Jamaica, we knew everything about the British Empire. But over here, they knew absolutely nothing. Once your face is black, you must come from Africa. We said 'We are from Jamaica' and they would say 'what part of Africa is that?' At first we thought they were taking the mickey when they asked us, 'Where did you learn to speak English' or 'Did you live in trees?' They did not have a clue.

(Wilmot in Rogers 2002: 5)

People in power are the norm, and everybody different is 'other'. Think of concepts such as Western/Non Western that are constantly used, the 'norm' versus the 'other'. Some years ago, choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh put it this way:

The assumption [is] that 'East', myself, must be a simple unchanging essence which stands for Tradition and The Past, and 'West' represents change, modernity and dynamism.

(Jeyasingh 1997:31-32)

Similarly, comments on ethnicity crop up when dealing with dance performed by brown people – whilst white ethnicity is never an issue for dance audiences and reviewers. Over 30 years ago Joann Keali'inohomoku wrote her landmark article 'An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance' (1969). Since then it has been republished many times. I have been teaching at different universities now for over twenty years and this article has

remained on the reading list of most of my courses! Every year students discover it and every year they are 'shocked' by it.

They are shocked because they have never thought of ballet in this way. Because ballet is transnational it is perceived as being universal and as such, a-cultural, despite the fact that one can easily contextualise it within a European socio-historical framework. The 'art form' has been separated from its 'culture', as Anu Giri commented, 'when you think of ballet you do not think France, Louis XIV, the Sun King. You think tutu, point shoes and elongated lines' (2001). Yet bharatanatyam, which is also transnational, remains rooted for many in a specific image of an ancient Indian classical high culture through its links to the *Natya Sastra*, despite numerous historical facts showing contradictory evidence. To mention a few: numerous scholars, such as Chakravorthy, Medhuri, Vatsyayan, have discussed how what we see today has been largely re-constructed in the early part of the 20th century. And Mandakranta Bose in particular has discussed that, whilst in the *Natya Sastra* the regional and popular genres, or *desi* tradition, were left out as it focused on the high art or *marga* traditions, 'in technique as well as aesthetic intent, today's dances owe far more to the regional and popular dances that Bharata explicitly left out of his account' (Bose: vii). Furthermore, it is worth noting here that bharatanatyam is practiced in many parts of the world today, sometimes by individuals who have never set foot in India.

Although I acknowledge that labels are necessary to make sense of the world surrounding us, I feel it is important that we look at the complexities underlying processes of identification and labelling. My question is: when does a name/label become a limitation and by extension, a liability? I want to explore now some of the notions embedded in labels such as 'Indian dance/dancer' and 'South Asian dance/dancer', framing the discussion within a debate on identity/alterity and inclusion/exclusion.

Dancers and arts officers coined the label 'South Asian dance' probably in the late 1980s in the UK to replace the term 'Indian dance', a term widely accepted despite the fact that it was reductionist, and simplified the complex Indian situation with its many cultures, religions, languages and dance systems. Creating a label that was further generalising was done for political reasons: practitioners argued that the dance systems falling under the category were not practiced in India alone, and they felt that a more generic term would be more appropriate by being somewhat more neutral. Just as the term 'contemporary' dance is a generic term that

overlooks the differences that exist, for example, between Graham and Release techniques, and instead recognises the similarities of ways of making sense of the body in terms of aesthetics, or of apprehending space and music within these techniques, South Asian dance similarly irons out differences and foregrounds similarities.

Within a diasporic context one could argue that it also removes the dance from a notion of clear-cut lineage and a nostalgic notion of lost heritage, to find its place in a new setting. Situating oneself as South Asian, rather than Indian, or Gujarati, or whatever, establishes a kind of distance. Sudha Koul, the Kashmiri-American author, raises interesting issues about being South Asian which are pertinent here, in her book *The Tiger Ladies: a memoir of Kashmir* (2002).

Whenever I hear of a South Asian exhibit or event, if I can make it I do. It tickles me; this is a new nationality, South Asian, forged for us by time, pulling us together when we have torn ourselves apart. The fact is that we are the same people. Our language, food, clothes, music, the things that make us laugh and cry are all the same. [...]. We have something buried underground, but not yet excavated, that ties us together. I believe that although South Asia has been chopped and sliced, we have been pushed together again by our underlying forces, in time that lives in cycles.

(Koul 2002: 212)

The way Koul generalises is interesting, as is her use of being 'the same', because it acknowledges a certain sensitivity, which in her words is 'buried underground' and 'not yet excavated' and yet is imbued with 'South Asian-ness' and can be contrasted to the North American reality she is living in.

In contrast, the British based choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh argued at the *South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped!* conference, organised by *Akademi* in autumn 2002, that 'the term South Asia sounds like a country but it draws together disparate countries, linked by geography but defined by difference'. In her words her 'creative journeys these days generally start in a North that is post-most things and is linked to a South that is post-nothing, except – colonial, yet whose population tends to be cleaners at the sophisticated airports of the North'.

People have difficulties with the South Asia Dance label because it lumps together Indian,

Pakistani, Sinhalese, Nepalese, etc., dance forms, ignoring the differences between them, therefore not giving each dance technique the attention and respect it deserves. They are wary of a monolithic vision that erases individual choices. In this way the term South Asian could be seen almost like a prison and therefore more a hindrance than a support. Indeed, referring to the image evoked by the term at the *South Asian Aesthetics* conference mentioned earlier, artist Anish Kapoor argued, following a comment by dancer/choreographer Chitra Sundaram, that the conference could have been called *South Asian Aesthetics Unplugged* – that 'maybe we should unplug properly and let the South Asian flow out!'

Throughout our work, my colleagues and I, have regularly spoken with artists who are very much concerned that any label attached to their artistic practice conflates the artists that they are with the genre they work in. Farooq Choudhry, ex contemporary dancer himself and Company Manager for kathak/contemporary dancer Akram Khan, for example, told the researchers working with me during a focus group of dance promoters and ACE officers, which we had organised:

I think there is a danger with promoting an artist's work by looking at it from the point of view of promoting the art form itself. For example in contemporary dance, this has always been a problem – the blanket term is very dangerous because it loses the sense of the artists' identity. The artists themselves give the art form its identity through the way that they choose to express it. There are of course specific styles, and one must acknowledge that there is Bharata Natyam, Kathak etc that involve certain technical virtuoso skills. However, I am very sceptical myself of using blanket terms like South Asian dance.

Yet promoting works by using the performer's name implies that his or her name is sufficiently well known for the potential audience. Vayu Naidu, former artistic associate of the Asian theatre initiative at Leicester Haymarket Theatre (Natak), responded to Choudhry's comment by saying:

Akram Khan is Akram Khan and his work can come to Leicester with his name. So you have the Akram Khans, the Shobana Jeyasinghs and the Nahid Siddiquis in one tier. Then you have other companies like Angika and we have to say: this is Bharata Natyam. It is South Asian dance – this description has to be fed in. In the intermediate tier of groups you have to keep the genre as the title – you can't just go by the name.

We may need to simplify reality or use schemas in order to communicate. This may lead us,

for example, to see cultures as homogeneous and talk about them in the singular. It is important, however to recognise that within each culture, there is a rich diversity linked to social class, gender, age or whatever. In dance, for example, we talk about 'African' or 'Indian' dance as if such had a continental reality. We can accept these expressions as a short cut, just as we may talk about 'folk' or 'popular' dance, but we must always remember that any generic term not only simplifies reality but also, more importantly, may well be about establishing power relationships. As dancer/choreographer Jiva noted

When an artist's work involves any reference to a non-European culture or sexuality that is not heterosexual, the work is seen as suddenly culture or sexuality-specific.

A ballet-derived *grand plié* or *jeté* in Wayne McGregor's Random Dance Company is seen as a shape of movement to exemplify hypercool postmodernity, while the bharata natyam extracted *mulu mandi* or *prayanganam* in the Shobhana Jeyasingh Dance Company is seen as cultural difference.

Both artists are equally drawing on a classical heritage, but the latter is seen to be hiding behind the thin veil of Indian dance, somehow inhibiting it from making any meaningful 'real art'. This double standard employed by the gaze of the spectator assumes a universality of the former, therefore implying superiority over the latter - but fails to notice that both artists are enhancing their work through their respective classicisms.

(Jiva 2000:17)

This attitude is by no means confined to the UK. French dancer/choreographer Hamid Benmahi in *Chronic(s)*, an autobiographical piece about his eclectic dance career (dancing his roots spreading from hip-hop to ballet), for example, includes an interview. It goes something like: 'Are you Arab or Algerian?', 'I thought we were going to talk about my choreography', 'How often do you go home?', 'I thought we were going to talk about my choreography', 'is it important for you to go home?', 'I thought we were going to talk about my choreography' and so on. Indeed where is home for many of us in our contemporary world? Where is the home the 100 millions of Indian Muslims are supposed to go to when some members of fundamentalist parties such as the RSS (Rashtryia Swayamsevak Sangh) exhort them to 'go home'?

Who decides where home is? Who decides where we belong and what our identity is? The author Salman Rushdie, in his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), has one of the characters, Aadam Aziz, reflect on how he had learned from his German friends that

India – like radium – had been 'discovered' by the Europeans; [...] this was finally what separated Aadam Aziz from his friends, this belief of theirs that he was somehow the invention of their ancestors.

(Rushdie 1991:11)

Many of the individuals in the British South Asian dance scene are very much aware that their practice has to be situated within what is currently being called 'postcolonial theory' and articulate just as Jiva, cited above, how their work is being looked at. Naseem Khan recalled the launch of ADiTi - the National Organisation of South Asian Dance in Bradford in 1989.

We were not a little nervous when the procession took off, crossing the road from the stern statue of Victoria to beat on the symbolically closed doors of the Alhambra, the very representative of Eurocentric culture.

(Khan 1999:11).

As a theoretical framework grown out of anti-colonialism, a movement informed by socialist ideas of social justice, one could argue that one of the primary aims of postcolonial theory is to change people from objects of colonial violence into subjects of history. As such it can bring together solid intellectual questioning and moral consideration. Yet, many of the artists we talked to were also aware that, with some exceptions, the powers of today are the same as the powers of the colonial era, albeit transformed by the diaspora. In what way, they asked, is the contemporary situation that different to what happened under the old colonial empires? Indeed, one could argue that not much has changed. In the past, the non-Western world provided raw materials for the West to develop its industries and get richer. Today this situation continues, with workers in the Bangalore-based call centre answering enquiries from people in America and the UK. Additionally, the non-Western world provides data for intellectuals and artists within the western Academies to elaborate theories about cultural diversity and create intercultural performances. Our research project, for example, was criticised by dancer/scholar Uttara Coorlawala when she first heard about it, stating that in her view it was as if dancers of the subcontinent could serve only as subjects and informants for Anglo-European researchers.

The artists we worked with were both willing and able to articulate their engagement with the monolithic label South Asian Dance because of its expediency, whilst at the same time being very much aware and willing to discuss publicly the heterogeneity within the field. This was evident in the comments a number of individuals made about ADiTi, for example, when it

celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1999. Abha Adams, ADiTi's first director, mentioned that in her eyes the organisation's greatest challenge was 'to bring together what was perceived to be a divided dance community' (1999:10). Similarly Shreela Gosh, ADiTi's director between 1992 and 1995 argued

With my Indian background and penchant for mythological stories, I ought to have relished the opportunity to ride such a multi-headed, many-winged, multi-faceted creature... I wish all those aboard ADiTi a very pleasant flight, but do remember to fasten your seatbelts! (1999:122)

Within another context, kathak artist Pratap Pawar discussed how in his life he had 'seen many egos interfere with good teaching and learning practices' (in Holland-Matzos 1999:15). Whilst in its column in *Extradition* magazine, the anonymous 'Mozzie' compared the South Asian dance scene to extended families and their 'scandals, insults, generosity, liveliness. Backbiting as much as back scratching ...' (Mozzie 2000:32).

This multiplicity of discourses, heterogeneity and robust interchanges between people has been present throughout my own research involvement with South Asian dance, and I was often reminded of one of Vikram Seth's characters, Abdus Saalam, in *A suitable boy* who argues

Dear Chacha Nehru, I felt like saying, this is India, Hindustan, Bharat, the country where the fraction was invented before the zero. If even the heart is divided into four parts can you expect us Indians to divide ourselves into less than four hundred?'

(Vikram Seth 1993: 1112)

Many artists feel that if they are classed as 'Indian' or 'South Asian', this usually leads to exoticisation and to an engagement with the work that remains at surface level, forgetting the multiplicity of layers found in both cultural and artistic understanding. They do not deny the significance of issues of geography and boundaries, and that the construction of their identities was negotiated within them. Similarly I am also very much aware of the danger inherent in any research dealing with identity in that it can be seen to 'ethnicise' its subjects and in this way continue in the steps of the very colonial discourse which I am questioning. Indeed this was at the basis of Coorlawala's criticisms mentioned earlier.

Many artists also agree that most British Asians share an experience of relocation, but they stress that this relocation is multi-faceted. Furthermore, it is important to note too that relocation is not the prerogative of British Asians. London, after all, is known for being (and having been throughout its history) a city of migrants, whether coming from the Home Counties in the eighteenth century; the West of Ireland in the nineteenth; or colonies further afield in the twentieth. As photographer Suran Goonatilake mentioned during the *South Asian Aesthetics* conference, location matters, and London's unique characteristics have allowed for 'shaping a hybrid, thus making a new form rather than a fusion where the strands remain visibly separate'. This is why for many artists, London has acted as a kind of engine, which, as Christopher Bannerman argued in his summary of the day, 'has provided a location where identities are up for a fluid understanding'. What is crucial therefore is that one must avoid 'othering' members of minorities. Issues of identity and alterity must be looked at throughout society, and to me this must be done within a framework of inclusion/exclusion and of access to resources.