

DANCING IN THE DIASPORA:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DANCE PRACTICES

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## **Abstract**

My research focus is to develop my own personal choreographic voice by contextualizing and investigating the works of three contemporary Indian dance choreographers in the diaspora who have trained in the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam-Anita Ratnam, Hari Krishnan and Shobana Jeyasingh. The three dance practitioners, although with similar backgrounds, have embarked on three different creative routes and reached different destinations in terms of cultural and artistic productions. My research is directed to understanding how they have adapted the embodied knowledge of this classical dance form to create a contemporary dance language through their works. I will gather this knowledge and channel my findings to inform my own work as an emerging contemporary dance artist. Through a practice-led research producing three new dance works, I will activate my research findings and incorporate them into my evolving choreographic process.

## **Dedication**

*To the brave Contemporary Indian dancer who believes that creating art is a wonderful privilege and is devoted to writing her own chapter in dance on the global stage.*

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary dance as an art form is a continuous search of new forms and dynamics; without fixed or established movement patterns. It isn't a specific dance technique but a collection of methods developed from modern and post-modern styles and can take on many forms. It has frequent dialogues with other aesthetic languages such as audio-visual techniques, visual or fine arts, lighting, architecture, music, circus and others.

Contemporary dance is art whose working material is the movement of humans.<sup>1</sup>

From a personal point of view, contemporary dance is a form of dance that draws from different styles that allow for a deep exploration and investigation of historical, classical and modern forms. It allows the dancers a heightened sense of freedom of movement to express their individuality through methods of improvisation and experimentation.

Contemporary Indian dance unfolds at the intersection of classical Indian dance forms, martial arts, western movement forms and new media to create an evocative 'hybrid' dance language. Although contemporary Indian dance has a relatively recent history, this new space of strikingly kinesthetic movement vocabulary reflects what is new, current and modern in Indian dance language. Contemporary Indian artists work relentlessly, extending the horizons of Indian dance. Experiments in thematic content and kinesthetic movement coexist with the traditional forms to create a uniqueness that sheds new light on Indian

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<sup>1</sup> As defined in [www.contemporary-dance.org](http://www.contemporary-dance.org)

dance. With changing audience expectations, artists have received enthusiastic responses not just within India but internationally as well.

In her book 'The Square and Circle of Indian Arts', Kapila Vatsyayan describes the investigation of contemporary dance as "an enquiry into the part played by the body and the sense of the Indian speculative thought and how this gives rise to a cohesive and integrated vision of artistic creation."(Vatsyayan 3)

This observation resonates with my own personal journey of training in the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam in the Middle East where I spent most of my childhood years, and where I first learnt to dance the form of Bharatanatyam. I then moved to India, my home country to continue my higher education and training. Now finding myself in the Canadian context, I try to find new and fresh perspectives to my dance form that enjoy a modern currency. As an emerging choreographer in the diaspora, without diluting the sanctity of my traditional training, I find the need to deconstruct my rule-bound dance to create vocabulary that is more accessible and rewarding for my audiences as much as it is for the dancers and the makers of the dance. I navigate contemporary expressions of my dance practice through movement syntax, narrative and use of new media. I create and work in the domain of contemporary dance – to develop a dance language that is understandable to others, be acknowledged by the experts in the field and also be inclusive. As artists, we aspire to perhaps change the domain or establish a new domain. My choreographic thesis employs a practical engagement to the art as well as textual research. I revisit the critical frames that underpin my practice, allowing my dance to move forward.

As part of my research that investigates contemporary Indian dance practices in the diaspora, it was important to consider the theoretical frames of viewing the art form; one notably is the “potent space”<sup>2</sup> of multiple ethnicities, nationalities and geographies. What does it mean for creative expression while straddling the space between being Indian and Canadian or British and South Asian? These hyphenated identities invariably demand a constant negotiation between tradition and modern, between the constant pull of individual expression and an allegiance to the past.

It is important to note here that the word “tradition” is often misunderstood as an uninterrupted and unchanging identity. A conventional representation of a traditional art form such as Bharatanatyam implies that it is fixed and unchanged. In fact, Bharatanatyam has repositioned itself over the years. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to date, choreographers have negotiated between past and present, between nationality and transnationalism and between local and regional identities. Bharatanatyam today is a global dance practice characterized by local variation. (O’Shea 166)

For the purpose of this study, three choreographic projects were undertaken as case studies where I created dance works that developed departures from the traditional criteria of the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam and helped expand my aesthetic boundaries. Each of the case studies are discussed in detail in the following chapters. As they have evolved in the studio, my theoretical research has involved looking closely at specific contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Ketu H Katrak , in her book Contemporary Indian Dance describes the ‘potent space’ as the space of in-betweenness that involves crossing different movement vocabularies , and other boundaries set up by nationality, ethnicity and religion.

Indian dance practitioners whose process of creation and contributions to contemporaneity has in turn informed the underpinnings of my work.

## **Chapter One: History of Contemporary Indian Dance**

Contemporary Indian dance today includes a plethora of movement phrases and idioms along with multidisciplinary tools that artists use to create compelling dance works. Dance artists are pushing the boundaries of movement technique and finding connectives in other disciplines and genres thus enhancing one's own physical and intellectual caliber. From new music to spoken word, from being minimalist to using elaborate visual art and sculpture, new approaches are adopted to build an innovative language in the contemporary Indian dance practice. Prominent artists in the field have established distinctive signature styles and are increasingly visible on the global stage today.

As contemporary Indian dance is not codified in a detailed manner like the classical dance styles of India, it is often difficult to define what is 'contemporary' in the Indian context. Having said that, contemporary dance in India does enjoy a historical narrative in its own right.

It was in the late 1920s, pioneer Uday Shankar who is hailed as the father of modern dance in India, carved an impeccable niche on the international stage. Uday Shankar (8 December 1900 – 26 September 1977) was an Indian dancer and choreographer, best known for creating a style of dance, drawing from European theatrical techniques to Indian classical dance, imbued with elements of Indian classical, folk, and tribal dance. It wasn't until he met and worked closely with Anna Pavlova, that he was encouraged to return to India and dig deep into the vast resources of the Indian dance tradition. He returned to India in 1930 from Europe and immersed himself in the many movement vocabularies that were alive

within the classical and folk traditions of India. He looked to the West for its wide vision, but he appreciated the wonderful variety and scope of expression afforded by the different classical and folk dances in his own country.

His quest for personal expression led him to incorporate different Indian classical dance styles, namely Bharatanatyam and Kathakali<sup>3</sup> into his choreographic productions. Steering away from the highly codified methods of training and presenting Bharatanatyam, his process was guided by the movement of the human body which was most important for him. The music and props followed suit after movement was embodied in its complete essence. This was a significant change in the way dance and movement was created at the time. It used to be that dance would always adapt to music, not the other way around. He invited teachers from different genres to train his company of dancers to mould and manipulate their bodies to a state where they could produce a varied, rich and contemporary dance vocabulary. With this new inspiration and his western influences in the space of stagecraft, lighting and choreography, Uday Shankar, in the 1930s and 1940s travelled extensively and perpetuated an interest in western audiences for the Indian performing arts.

Uday Shankar, although creating new ways of presenting dance, did not always break away from traditional themes. Constant reinterpretations of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kathakali is one of the classical dance forms of India that is known for its elaborate make up and costume, well-defined body movements presented in tune with the live playback music and complementary percussion. It originated in the state of Kerala , India.

<sup>4</sup> The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are regarded as the two great Sanskrit epics of India that play a significant role in Hindu literature.

were attempted at this time. He however rendered it in abstract movement, selecting instrumental music to heighten the effect and movement of the dance. (Kothari 22).

Uday Shankar and his works are considered a catalyst in positioning the Indian sensibilities of dance on the flourishing Western stage. Some of Uday Shankar's famous works include the innovative ballet, 'Labour and Machinery' and the trend setting film, 'Kalpana,' on the theme of dance.

Although he set a precedent for modern dance in India, after his time, many of his students and practitioners fell back onto the traditional and classical styles of movement. This was partly because of the absence of Shankar's genius and showmanship to guide the practitioners but also they found refuge in the classical practices that had emerged over years of distillation. Hence, most of their works were based on musical compositions, themes, gestures and movement that had been tried and tested many times before. There were less risk takers in terms of creating new movement and bold experimentation.

It wasn't until the 70's when Chandralekha burst onto the scene, on a trajectory that was diametrically opposite from the Bharatanatyam presented then, that the idea of Contemporary Indian dance was strengthened. Chandralekha (6 December 1928 – 30 December 2006), was a dancer and choreographer from India who was an exponent of performances fusing Bharatanatyam with martial art forms like Kalaripayattu<sup>5</sup>. A pioneer foremother to Contemporary Indian dancers today and a strong anti-establishment voice,

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<sup>5</sup> Kalaripayattu is a martial art that originated in the state of Kerala in India.

Chandralekha was conflicted early on about the discrepancies in depicting art within the reality she lived . (Katrak 42)

An epiphany happened for her as an artist while she was presenting her *arangetram*<sup>6</sup>. From her *margam*<sup>7</sup> , she presented a piece on the beauty and abundance of the river Yamuna in all its abundance and luxuriance at a time when the region of Rayalseema in the state of Andhra Pradesh was stricken by drought. She speaks of how newspaper images of cracked earth overpowered her and as she moved, she felt crippled at the thought of this dichotomy. This awakening led to a lifetime of exploration of the body itself and how the body is positioned in society.

Trained in Bharatanatyam, her style and approach used the physical body in new ways with a strong interplay of male and female energies. The body is placed in the context of the life and the society it thrives in. She used to collaborate extensively with other dancer-choreographers, musicians, visual artists and poets which as a practice was unheard of in the 70s.

Chandralekha's strong social consciousness led her to boldly look at the dancing body as a powerful tool through movement technique that drew heavily from martial arts forms such as Kalaripayattu.

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<sup>6</sup>*Arangetram* is the debut on-stage performance of a classical dance student, after undertaking years of training. Many believe that it is the graduation of dance.

<sup>7</sup> *Margam* 'means way. It is a framework that incorporates a variety of dance compositions set in the Bharatanatyam movement vocabulary.

She considered the dialectic of tradition/modernity as a non-issue in her work. She believed that dance must stand on its own without unnecessary props of music and sentiments.

(Venkatraman 51). Her works were bold and dabbled with the concepts of sensuality, sexuality and spirituality often shocking the conservative viewers at the time. At the same time, she earned a large fan following for her radical and innovative approach.

Unlike Uday Shankar who was influenced by western aesthetics, Chandralekha believed that allowing the west to dictate and influence one's creative work is in turn colonizing the mind and the body.

In her writings she says, "The issue for me is not tradition vs modernity. I do not see them as two different things. The task of the artist is to modernize the tradition through the creative process. Not transplanting, borrowing, imitating or becoming a shadow culture of some other culture. It has to be an inward journey into one's own self; a journey constantly relating, refining the reality of the in-between area, to enable tradition to flow free in our contemporary life." (Kothari 58)

More recently, Dr. Manjushree Chaki-Sarkar created a dance idiom which is now called Navanritya. With her late daughter Ranjabati Sarkar and their troupe based in Calcutta she did a great deal of research and codification of the dance style and presented a large number of choreographic productions. This was a result of the movement material they had amassed which needed an order to communicate ideas and movement to the dancers. This was the first time a dance company was establishing a set of codes and techniques to interpret contemporary Indian expression in dance. As they travelled the world, *Navanritya*

became a highly efficient method of training dancers in movement forms that drew from Indian bases, even when they were not from the same training background. The intention was however, to expand beyond the boundaries of form and create mindsets that would be open and willing to various methods of work. (Kothari 90)

With growing interaction between dance practitioners all over the country and the world, and awareness of important contemporary issues, many classical dancers have also stepped into the realm of contemporary dance through exploration of one or more dance styles. Often martial arts such as *Kalaripayattu* of Kerala and *Chhau* of eastern India are incorporated into dance choreography, lending greater vigor and variety to the artistic expression.

In some cases dancers work from within the form itself. Having watched Malavika Sarukkai perform her solo work, *Ganga – Nitya Vaahini*, The Eternal River, one sees innovation in the way themes take on a contemporary life of its own. In this case Sarukkai's narrative pays homage to the sacred river Ganga and its importance in Indian culture, history, and a timelier arch of exuding concepts of the environment, and spirituality. I begin to see how she uses her staunch training in Bharatanatyam to vent her concern for the ecology. I appreciate how, although with a contemporary message, she never departs from the grammar of Bharatanatyam.

## **Context of Diaspora**

*Geographical locations and relocations by choice or necessity provide access to learning different movement techniques that inspire 'hybrid' dance creations. Geographical locations also play a prominent role in exploring contemporary themes, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, physical and mental health.*

*Ketu H Katrak*

Over the last 50 years, people have relocated from their countries of origin and contemporary Indian dance artists have created works that have been trend setting within new geographies. Dancer and scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala discusses how migrations influence dancing bodies: “As historically accumulated constructs of body, aesthetics, and dance migrate across intra-cultural geo-cultural divides, their meanings and values necessarily transform in the negotiation with changed contexts and intertexts. Manifestations of difference keep transforming, within an ongoing dialectic of identity and difference.” (Katrak 155)

Being part of a diaspora, especially when you are a second generation artist can have its challenges. One is continuously negotiating tradition, translation and innovation. There are innumerable aesthetic parameters and financial constraints one faces in order to bring their art to contemporary audiences.

Among second generation dance artists, notions of home and belonging may be less conflicted than the first generation of artists who left their homeland to move to a different geographical location. The cultural differences were more emphatic. However, irrespective

of the generation, to 'belong' within the North American and British context involves continuing prejudices of ethnicity, gender, class and nationality within the mainstream cultures.

Immigrant audiences may hold on to traditional and familiar expressions rather than support innovations. This proves challenging to the crop of emerging as well as established contemporary Indian dancers who have to bridge the past and the present in dance vocabularies. They don't just need to 'translate' their work for the mainstream audiences, it is also needed within the same ethnic group divided by generation, class and education as these ethnic groups are less homogenous than mainstream audiences.

Many artists have to therefore also embrace 'hybridity' as a goal in their choreography. In its most basic sense, hybridity refers to a mixture. Today, its contemporary usage is scattered across popular culture and academic disciplines. Hybridity is a significant element in contemporary dance. In exploring contemporary themes, innovations in form and structure are woven into concepts of sexuality and gender, domestic violence and other political issues that draw parallels and connection in their own communities and across the world. (Katrak 156-158)

The striking characteristic of the second generation of contemporary Indian dancers is their openness to a varied range of movement styles. Their practice fosters creative alliances through collaboration. Dance artist Sheetal Gandhi who combines Kathak, ballet and postmodern dance into her vocabulary brings about an interesting point when she says "I incorporate Indian culture into some of the dances I choreograph, but not in every case. It's

not like a stamp I have to mark all my dances with. I like to experiment with different styles.” (Katrak 185)

Contemporary choreography is becoming increasingly multidisciplinary as contemporary Indian dance artists in the diaspora push the parameters of their dynamic and innovative dance form.

## Chapter Two: Research Methodology

As this thesis is a practice-based research, the methodology adopted is artistic creation and production. As part of the requirements of the study, I created three dance pieces which postured as case studies over a period of six months.

The first piece was called *Belong*. It was part of the MFA I am Solo series. *Belong* was an autobiographical piece which was influenced by personal narratives, individual perspectives and cultural memories. With this piece, I embarked on my investigation of contemporary Indian dance in the diaspora. I allowed the process to help me understand how Indian movement vocabulary and narratives are reimagined through compositional structure and choreographic choices for contemporary audiences. This piece was staged from Sept 24-Sept 26 in the Mclean Performance Studio at York University.

The second piece was called *Bandhana-the bond*. It was part of the self-produced segment of the MFA study. It was presented as part of the show 'Fall Immersion' that was produced with fellow MFA candidate Nikolaos Markakis where we invited five other Toronto based choreographers both emerging and established to present works that represented culturally distinct dance styles. *Bandhana* was staged with three dancers, two of them trained in the Indian Classical dance styles of *Mohiniyattam* and *Bharatanatyam* respectively and one from the western dance background of ballet and modern dance.

The third and final part of the thesis study was called *Kindred*. It had five dancers, some of who are trained in *Bharatanatyam* and ballet. The process of creation took place from

November to January with the final presentation from Feb 10- Feb 12, 2016 at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan theatre at York University.

All three of the case studies or dance pieces followed a certain set of activities in the creative process– research and development of movement , making choreographic choices, guiding dancers through metaphors and images , designing costume, selecting music, dramaturgical and rehearsal notes, writing and disseminating information for promotional purposes, public presentations and documentation.

### **Chapter Three: Belong**

For my autobiographical piece that was part of the 'I Am' Solo series, I presented 'Belong'. The project demanded us to look deeply into our own choreographic and creative practice that had led us to this particular point in time.

As a result, I wanted to express the narrative through vocabulary that infused elements that are rich in Bharatanatyam. This came naturally to my trained body: the symmetry, the hand gestures, the rhythmic patterns of the feet, and the facial expressions but I wished to use these distinct technical markers as a point of departure to explore the contemporary energy in the piece.

#### **ARTIST IN FRAME: Anita Ratnam**

While I was creating this piece, I looked closely at the work of Contemporary Indian dancer Anita Ratnam who is currently based out of Chennai but travels extensively presenting her works that are mostly solo presentations. She calls herself a 'contemporary classicist', as she finds new dance aesthetics which combine the classical with the contemporary, the modern with the traditional.

Ratnam works from this potent intersection of the narrative and the abstract, a rich repertoire of gestures and movement vocabulary borrowed from Bharatanatyam – and new contemporary aesthetics that draw from theatre, mime, music and the spoken word.

In Anita Ratnam's work called 7 Graces, which is a contemporary imagination of the different hues of the Buddhist goddess Tara, a work choreographed in collaboration with

dancer choreographer Hari Krishnan, Ratnam drew from not just Bharatanatyam but other diverse forms such a Yoga, *Kalaripayattu*, modern dance and Buddhist liturgical dance. There is a meditative quality that is exuded with the interweaving of her movement with a powerful soundscape that ranges from typical rhythmic syllables of Bharatanatyam to oriental music along with the Western piano.

She places special emphasis on costuming, now her trade mark. When she is not performing the purely classical form of Bharatanatyam in the traditional attire, she explores costuming by stripping down the over decorated classical dancer and moving from being a spectacle to freeing the body and making it visible in a new form.



Fig 1 Anita Ratnam in *7 Graces*. Photo Courtesy: Indo American Arts Council, Inc

Ratnam designs costumes with an astute eye for innovation that help reveal shapes and lines of the human form. In *7 Graces* she uses a bright red organza fabric for pants and a fitting top, and drapes a heavily woven red cloth over her arms that lends to the tapestry of a sensual and powerful figure. This conscious choice does not distract from the

movement; it simply adds to the overall aesthetic. There is great care and attention to detail to build this cohesiveness in her works.

Costumes play a big role in lending to the ‘visual’ imagination of the audiences. In her book ‘Form without Formula’, Patricia Beatty eloquently states, “You want the costumes, as they embody the choreography, to etch pictures that will remain in the consciousness of the audience long after the curtain has come down”. (Beatty 51)

As I delved into the creation of *Belong*, all of Ratnam’s conscious choices to present compelling narratives became a reference point through my research in the studio of choreographing a piece on my dancing body. From music, to costumes, to stage sets, I made informed choices from Ratnam’s works that have inspired me. I used my history of being geographically raised in different parts of the world as my overarching narrative. I questioned whether the concept of home was really a place. Life for me began in the Middle East, where I was initiated into the training of classical Bharatanatyam owing to a number of trained classical dance teachers in the Indian diaspora. I was fortunate to find a teacher who was inspiring in her teaching methods. It was diligent and rigorous for the next ten years. A strong foundation in technique was imparted to me in those formative years that helps me today to build on my contemporary work.

As most other students of Indian origin raised in the Middle East, I then moved to India to pursue my higher academic education and continued to train in my dance form. I now live in Canada, which I call home. As an artist, places and people have informed my creative pursuits. I wanted to share this through my autobiographical piece.

Beginning with composition structure, I divided the performing space into three zones by lighting each of them differently. I began downstage left to highlight my Middle Eastern aspect of the narrative, centre stage to showcase my Indian heritage and dance training and downstage right to where I currently reside, Canada.

To enhance the element of drama, I added the element of image projections, both natural and abstract to embellish each of my space zones. And using different lighting on each of the three delineated spaces helped form an arch from beginning to end of my piece.

As I moved through my choreography I realized how my body was the living archive of my training, my dance and my movement. I was reaching into my kinesthetic memories to craft *Belong*. I used *jathis*<sup>8</sup> and *abhinaya*<sup>9</sup> as I moved from depicting one phase of my life to the other.

In terms of costuming, I used pieces of clothing over a black fitted top and loose black pants, each of them signifying the three distinct phases. As I moved from one phase to the other, the fabric, in this case a golden skirt was removed to move into the second segment to wrap around a deep blue waist cloth from the Bharatanatyam attire which was again stripped off my body as I stepped into my final phase. While costuming, I realized I had found an analogy to my process. The base of black top and black pants was the constant throughout the piece – my training in bharatanatyam is a constant in my process of

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<sup>8</sup>*Jathi* is a string of foundational steps or adavus that form rhythmic footwork sequences in Bharatanatyam.

<sup>9</sup>*Abhinaya* is the art of expression in Indian aesthetics.

choreography. Every time a new fabric or piece of clothing came on or was removed, it was a way to play with, integrate and expand the idea of innovation within my craft.



Fig 2. Suma Suresh in *Belong*. Photography: David Hou

The music for *Belong* was chosen carefully as well. After listening to many selections of Arabic instrumental music, I found a piece that drew out a vivid imagery of the desert landscape for my first segment. I experimented with a recording of a *jathi* to overlap this Arabic soundscape. This was to bring my audience into this juxtaposition of two worlds where I thrived in the initial years of my life. The syllables I used to create the *jathi* were repeated, this time in a faster rhythm to break down my dance vocabulary into a series of movement that was typical to the form of Bharatanatyam. So this formed the second segment of *Belong* as I travelled the space from downstage left to centre stage. A contemporary Indian piece of music from the album, *Veena in Vienna* lent itself to create

my third section of depicting my current life as a woman in Canada- motherhood taking paramount significance. The music had a sense of playfulness which embellished the movement vocabulary of me interacting with my children.

Through the process of creating *Belong*, I believe I echoed my strong Indian aesthetics as an artist as I delved into my personal experiences to depict a full canvas of my world. This is where I found inspiration from Anita Ratnam's works where, although steeped in Indian tradition and aesthetics, her work remains contemporary in its form and presentation.

*Belong* was drawing from not just my history, but the embodied knowledge of my practice over the years. I was beginning to push my notions of creativity within this space and looking forward to explore more choreographic works with this new sense of possibilities.

## **Chapter Four: Bandhana – the Bond**

From working on a solo piece over the last few months to move into the studio with dancers was an exciting opportunity to continue to hone my choreographic skills – now on other dancing bodies. I knew I had to develop choreographic material to prepare myself and the dancers. I was going to entrust the life of the dance I was creating into the hands of the dancers; that was exciting and daunting at the same time. The narrative of *Bandhana* was developed as a result of a deep connection I personally feel with my woman friends.

*Bandhana* meaning bond in Sanskrit was to honor these relationships with integrity and honesty.

### **ARTIST IN FRAME: Hari Krishnan**

It was the work of Toronto based dancer Hari Krishnan's work that I investigated throughout my creative process of working on *Bandhana*. Hari Krishnan is known in the contemporary dance circle as a choreographer who tackles stereotypes of gender and sexuality through movement vocabulary that draws from Bharatanatyam, the classical style he is trained in. He is currently the Artistic Director of inDance, a multiethnic dance company founded in 1999 that creates provocative, stimulating and entertaining works.

He also performs purely classical concerts regularly. He believes that the Bharatanatyam he performs has ample scope for dramatic expression for the contemporary world he lives in.

Although I wish to focus on his process of creating contemporary work, it is difficult to divorce the heavy influence of Bharatanatyam from his experimentation in contemporary dance. In Janet o Shea's book 'At Home in the World', she says Krishnan refers to history

as a source of choreographic material but not as a standard that sets the parameters for innovation. He strives to push the envelope without compartmentalizing his work which needs to be accessible, enjoy a modern currency and is viewed by a diverse range of audiences. And he has done this with great success. (O'Shea 61)

As part of the Indian diaspora in Canada, Krishnan addresses the expectations of the mainstream Canadian dance audience that is inclined to label most choreography of Indian origin as 'traditional'. He is a risk taker and he believes a conscious awareness is needed to view it differently. As a Canadian dancer of Indian origin who hails from Singapore and has undergone training in Chennai and Tanjavur, India and who now divides his time between Canada and US, his geography and global situation has led him to create works that are a visual juxtaposition of classical and contemporary ideas. This is what inspires me most about his trajectory as an artist in Canada. As an emerging artist myself in the city of Toronto, it is very important for me to break the preconceived notions of what is Indian dance to be able to position myself confidently on the mainstream stage. I want my audiences to be able to absorb my work for the dance itself in its present pulse, rather than constantly draw connections to the past and deem it 'traditional'. It does require a certain amount of audience awareness which can be built over time through dance opportunities that cater to this need.

Although the first year of the MFA saw an in-depth study of course material and literature on creativity and choreography, along with a practice that was mostly solos mounted on our own dancing bodies, this was the first opportunity to apply all the learning from the previous year onto other dancing bodies.

It was important for me as a choreographer to communicate the intent of my piece to my dancers. I had a three member cast, two dancers who were trained in the Indian classical style of Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam as well as traditional folk styles along with my third dancer who was trained in Ballet and Modern Dance. While the Indian dancers were venturing into this new space of contemporary expression, the Western dancer eased into her role and purpose quickly. This was challenging for the Indian dancers as it was difficult for them to understand the abstractness of the different motifs I was urging them to explore. They come from a training where the narratives are well defined and emotions are carefully etched out to pick up and absorb.

As a choreographer, it was important for me to allow them a space to learn and grow this new dance landscape and have them remain patient through the process. The first few sessions were explorations of understanding how the body can move within new contexts. What happens to your body when you feel extreme sadness? Where does the emotion sit? How does the body want to move? Where is the movement initiated? Although this was time consuming, before I began the actual work, I realized I was exposing my dancers to other methods of viewing and comprehending form and movement. Using simple contemporary technique and exercises, I opened the space up for the dancers to think and move in new ways. As Jonathan Burrows, states in his book “A choreographer’s handbook”, ‘form is something against which to push your imagination free’. (Burrows 28)

As dancers who heavily relied on prescribed patterns and set choreography, this new space of improvisation and exploration was uneasy and liberating at the same time.

As we progressed through the sessions at the studio and as I transferred my choreographic ideas, they slowly began to understand the essence of *Bandhana* – that it is an homage to a woman’s relationship with other women. It embodies how connected we can be as women and also feel very separate from one another.

Our rehearsal schedule allowed us to meet at the studios once a week for three hours. So every time a new segment was created, they had a week to really get the movement into their bodies.

What was fascinating for me to watch was how the movement I was creating for the dancers found itself sitting in these bodies differently. The aesthetic differences were not only because of the training they had in Western and Indian style of dancing respectively, but also within the training in the Indian classical dance styles. While one of them was trained in Mohiniyattam, the other was trained in Bharatanatyam, two distinctly different Indian classical dance styles. I began to question my own choices as a choreographer at this point. Did I want my dancers to embody what they were experiencing through the movement? Or did I want to see the movement the exact way I was creating it? How would I release the grip on the desire to control everything? My own experience in teaching Bharatanatyam to students is a highly rigorous exercise of imparting codified dance techniques. In this scenario, I had to remain open as a choreographer and allow the movement to find itself in the bodies and thereby find the collaborative movement amongst the dancers.

I then identified unique qualities in my dancers as I guided them through new material that best suited these qualities and their capabilities. While one of them moved with tremendous amounts of fluidity and grace, another would be more stoic in her presence while occupying space. While one was more grounded in using her weight, the others were lighter on their feet. Just navigating these different body dynamics lent its own characteristic to my choreography. I found myself guiding each one of them differently to mine the most out of their dancing bodies.



Fig 3 Bandhana-the Bond, in rehearsal. Photography: Suma Suresh

I indulged in some work with partnering and contact – elements that are not commonly used in my practice of Bharatanatyam. The contact work needed time to simmer with the Indian dancers who had not previously done much work in contact improvisation. Nevertheless, the dancers had an innate quality to animate the spaces they shared with the other dancers. This was a good point of departure for them to push the movement's

performative potential. I began to question how bodies relate in space – how they relate to one another. I was not just devising or creating movement. I was allowing it as well.

I found myself moving away from my natural habits of creating movement, such as movement phrases in ‘unison’. I was breaking up my vocabulary and giving it to the dancers at different times with different variations, so we could move away from the ‘sameness’. Again, to move away from a comfortable ensemble routine where movement happened together with the dancers, it was important for me to allow the dancers to determine when and how to move on their own drive. I even explored the other end of the spectrum – a counterpoint – where I tried to develop a harmonic relationship between dancing bodies although their rhythm and contours were different. The same movement phrase was used in different speeds and different directions. So visually, there is an appeal of sameness in the variation which I found new and exciting for myself as a choreographer. Leading different choreographic fragments that would in turn be part of a sense of choreographic unity was another exciting element to play with. From partnering and moving through space to connecting with the third dancing body and flowing into one whole entity brought with it a sense of unity that is familiar

With *Bandhana*, I was pushing my practice further in terms of movement vocabulary. Like Hari Krishnan’s works that draw heavily from his training in Bharatanatyam, I was exploring possibilities of using the Bharatanatyam technique as a point of departure to create new movement with my dancers. I began to understand how to guide my dancers through emotions that are simply not depicted on the face but through the dancing bodies as well.

## **Chapter Five: Kindred**

In *Kindred*, the last of the MFA thesis projects, I continued to explore the theme on patterns of attachment between women through a process of re-imagining the rich movement vocabulary of Bharatanatyam. Inspired by my own circle of women friends and life-long confidantes, I examine how women navigate a world soaked in social pressures, and how their deep friendships can nourish them throughout their lives.

### **Artist in Frame: Shobana Jeyasingh**

Some of the most successful contemporary Indian dance works have emerged from choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh, based in the UK, who now enjoys mainstream critical success in the field of contemporary dance. Originally trained in Bharatanatyam in India and Malaysia, she was a solo performer in the 80s who toured for several years before she started her own company in 1988. Soon after she formed Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company, she stopped dancing and focused on choreography and creation. She began to experiment with the style, commissioning her music mostly by Michael Nyman, who has collaborated with her on many projects since they began to work together. In the beginning of her choreographic journey, she drew heavily from the elements of Bharatanatyam; well-structured lines and directions and rhythmically articulate footwork were a staple in her earlier projects. Yet, within the set parameters of the style, the only one she is trained in, she began to expand her understanding of the body and its potential. With time, her work began to display a distinct signature style – alternating between the scorching accuracy of Bharatanatyam and an array of idiosyncratic abstract movement. (Kothari 160)

In her piece ‘Raid’, Jeyasingh draws inspiration from the Indian game Kabaddi – a version of Tag. Here she uses two disciplines – dance and sport that are pitted against one another as they foray into each other’s territory. She has the dancers move around the performing space executing fast speed *jathis* and joyful leaps, flouting the notion of decorum. Dressed simply in leggings and knee length tunics, the dancers have stripped down the Indian classical dancer image to create pure functional lines in space. It is with ‘Raid’ that Jeyasingh leapt into uncharted territory. Using sport movements freed her from the constraints of classical dance, which until then was the central reference point of her choreography. She describes herself as a ‘dance maker’ and over the years has created works that “make movement out of lot of disparate elements”. (Katrak 76)

She uses elements of martial art forms such as Kalaripayattu and Chhau<sup>10</sup>. Today her company dancers come from different ethnicities. Jeyasingh’s strength and genius lies in her bold experimentation with movement as well as collaboration. She works with musical stalwarts such as Michael Nyman and Illayarajah to create the score for her works. She collaborates with set designers and costume designers who have all lent to the “look” of her dance company. No longer referencing Indian style clothing, her costumes are always bold and weaving a simplicity that helps streamline the dancing body.

From the outset, Jeyasingh did not want her audiences to respond to her dance as ‘a cultural phenomenon’. She was uncomfortable that Indian dance was seen as a representative of Indian culture and not as its own dance language. In her attempt to create

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<sup>10</sup> Chhau dance is a genre of Indian tribal martial dance which is popular in the Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

her own dance idiom, she began to emphasize on the abstract and formal over the narrative legacy of Indian dance. (Katrak 76)

In her more recent work *Counterpoint*, her work was staged on the huge courtyard of Somerset House in London, an original work that had 20 women dancers clad in saffron-colored costumes lining up for their first entrance. The dancers began to use the courtyard as a stage but the 55 single jet fountains of the courtyard were also part of the performance as they were calibrated to continuously play among the dancers as they moved, adding its own luminous design to the space.



Fig 4 Shobana Jeyasingh's *Counterpoint* at Somerset House, London. Photography: Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company

The dancers configured into lines and squares echoing the geometry of the architecture they are firmly placed in. The dancers were soaked, yet their bodies continued to move with a sense of fluidity as they formed tight intimate shapes.

This site specific work that Jeyasingh created was a testimony of how far she had come in her personal investigation of hacking her own path and writing her own chapter in Contemporary Indian dance. Whether she is working with modern dancers or Bharatanatyam dancers, her work endeavors to create innovative movement so bodies can be exposed to the multi-nuances of dance. She is a compelling figure in Contemporary Indian dance, especially for second-generation British Asian dancers, who dabble with the idea of hybridity in post-modern times. They want to get to the roots of classicism and understand its significance yet find the courage to deconstruct it – an idea she has delved into very thoughtfully and diligently.

This is where my interest piques in her creative body of work. She says, “We do not want to be bound by history, but we do not want to deny it. It is desirable that one first understand classicism (i.e. classical dance, ballet or Bharatanatyam) and then understand how to depart from it. To break rules, you have to know the rules in a very deep way. Contemporary dance need not be a holiday from rigor.”(Katrak 75)

The process of *Kindred* began with a casting call out to dancers who had a similar backgrounds as mine – trained in a South Asian classical dance to provide a sound foundation to help build my choreography. The reasons behind choosing South Asian dancers specifically is because I was creating in the Contemporary ‘Indian’ space and this was going to be my point of departure for all my works. At the same time, I was also curious to have a body that was trained in the Western styles of ballet and jazz. I was interested to see what could evolve when these different bodies come together in the Studio.

The first few sessions at rehearsal, I found myself at play with the dancers and their capabilities. I introduced simple choreographic exercises with them – from moving through negative space to awareness activities. One of my dancers was not familiar with the contemporary space and found it very intimidating in the beginning. Here I was giving her the freedom to move away from what has always been prescribed to her in a tight compartment, and it seemed daunting at first. There was a crippling sense of self-consciousness and trepidation that I could sense in the room. I realized I had to act quickly and break this ice in order to mine what I wanted from this room of capable dancers. I had to communicate my vision and process to the dancers so they would get to know where I was coming from not just as a choreographer but as an individual as well. This part of the process I found very personal and as an artist I began to realize I draw inspiration from anything that offers itself to me at a given point of time. I was also building relationships with the dancers that were sound and reassuring.

As the choreographer, I had to articulate my process where I oscillate between the narrative and the abstract in my work. Movement to describe my narrative of women's relationships to each other had to be clear and recognizable. Working with contact and the far-reaching gaze to animate their performance space while revealing the inner nature helped extract the emotional states I was seeking from these dancers.

This came into their full understanding after weeks in the studio. I was constantly looking for new words, phrases, metaphors and offering hints to guide my dancers to get to the point where the dance could unfold freely and with significance to each one of them.

I was describing the nature of entanglements among women which demanded details that only words could provide. I decided to screen the documentary *Human* for my dancers at one of our rehearsals. *Human* is a 2015 documentary film by French environmentalist Yann – Arthur Bertrand. The film is simply first–person stories of people from across the world. It is a collection of candid close ups that offers an immersion into the core of what it means to be human. I picked out the women stories for the screening. Deeply personal and emotional, women spoke about the most significant thing in their lives – love, war, poverty, happiness. This film is particularly important to me for my work with *Kindred* because it embodies a richness that unites us as a race and I needed my dancers to feel the same way while developing this piece of work for me.

When I began to research and discover movement, I consciously did not bring music into the space. We were working with emotional states alone. I drew from my understanding of the Laban Movement Analysis, to help describe and visualize movement for my dancers. Using the concepts of Body, Effort, Shape and Space the dancers began to plunge into the work in a deeper way.

The arch of my piece was divided into two segments. The first was threaded by movement that was highly individualistic, giving each of them a distinct personality, where they delved deeply into their own emotional states. They had to be completely separate beings, yet with a commonality weaved into their dancing bodies. I created movement that helped them fuel their own habitual patterns but pushing further to create something new. In terms of costuming the piece, I wanted a deep shade of red on my dancers. Red has always given me a sense of fierce but sound energy that can propel the beings we are to higher

states. I used the same color of the deep red fabric on my dancers, but draped and stitched them differently on each of my five dancers to give their bodies the individuality they demanded.



Fig 5 Kindred by Suma Suresh. Photography: David Hou

The music chosen was a composition by Ludovico Einaudi called Diviniere. The piece filled the space with a subtle but intense color that did not compel the dance to follow the music. This was important as I was exploring movement that required my dancers to feel a sense of freedom. It would be quite the opposite if I allowed their movement to be dictated by the music, which was not my intention as a choreographer. At the same time, I was fully aware the task of weaving the dance through the music makes it inseparable from each other and yet distinctly different.

I listened to a variety of scores and allowed myself to identify qualities and feelings that the music incited in me. Patricia Beatty in her book, “Form without Formula”, states that

music and dance must be like a good marriage: the union allows both parties to maintain their separate identity and dignity knowing all the time, they belong together. (Beatty 37)

The latter half of my piece had music that was more dramatic. A contemporary Indian piece of music composed by Indian musicians Salim-Sulaiman, it used heavy instrumentation and choral singing to a traditional Indian *shloka*. This was a conscious choice as I wanted my dancers to move into the next phase of their interaction with each other as women who can connect, who can empower and who can pull each other up no matter what the circumstances. The music provided a number of markers or landmarks that helped through building transitions and develop the dance further. It was important to use them effectively rather than completely surrendering to the music. These markers helped me find my tone as a choreographer as it was satisfying to be in unison with the music. I realized that my training and background leads me to find refuge in the musicality of the piece. I understand that this can be a boon and a bane at the same time.

To add to the vision of my piece, I wanted to use projections to describe the intricacies of a woman's mind and her indomitable spirit. I found video footage of the surface of the sun while going through possible montages for the backdrop. This NASA image of the burning sun, at various levels, was an extension of the emotional state the dancers were inhabiting – the fire within themselves, an inner strength to vanquish the barriers constricting them, the turbulence outside of them in their own frenetic worlds – and how we navigate the pressures of the society and find our stillness and centeredness to bring about a shift in consciousness to live a deeper more meaningful life.

Once the dancers had the movement in their bodies, they plunged into performance mode through the stages of showings, tech and dress rehearsals culminating in three show days. What was fascinating to note for me as a choreographer, was the progress the dancers made as they moved through the piece with better conviction every single time they performed. I realized it was about learning to own the piece as a dancer, once the choreographer's task ended. Yet, my task did not fully end. I found myself reviewing the piece everytime it was staged, providing constructive feedback. Adjustments though sometimes small, for e.g., how and where the dancers gazed, how moving into the light would be more or less effective, etc. proved invaluable to the dancers' understanding of my vision.

## **Conclusion**

Today's artists range from the ones who are not intimidated by the dictates of tradition, regionalism or nationality to the ones who negotiate the past and the present. Some look at the world as their framework and continue to collaborate with artists from other disciplines and backgrounds. The others delve into movement vocabularies for personalized communication and expression through learnt and previously transmitted idioms.

From the contemporary Indian artists Ratnam, Krishnan and Jeyasingh who I have researched for the purpose of this study, I inherit a sense of deep conviction and intellect in forging ahead while working in the intercultural realities of the diaspora. Depending on the geographical locations, artists have access to different movement techniques other than their own. They are connected to new multimedia technologies that help embellish their works effectively. Location also plays an important role in the path that contemporary Indian dancers take to explore themes such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality, the environment and for the representation of social issues. (Katrak xxi)

The three artists have navigated the space of Contemporary Indian Dance with ambition and bold experimentation. Be it infusing the contemporary spirit with a primal meditativeness such as Anita Ratnam, or thoughtful engagement with concepts of diversity and sexuality as Hari Krishnan, or commitment to exploring movement through non-narrative and abstract work, their contributions have allowed each one of them to carved their niche and established their signature style in the contemporary Indian dance landscape.

In Canada alone there has been a considerable amount of innovative work in contemporary Indian dance. Artists such as Natasha Bakht and Nova Bhattacharya, both having trained in traditional Bharatanatyam have now created a niche for themselves on the mainstream contemporary dance stage. Infact, they are no longer termed as ‘contemporary Indian dancers’ but simply contemporary dance artists. Having said that, you continue to see nuances of their classical Indian training in their work, which reaffirms that the embodied knowledge of tradition will continue to stir the dancing bodies no matter which direction the creation of the dance takes.

I understand that it is important to work collaboratively, to share resources and strategies to succeed as a contemporary Indian artist in a world that is steeped in cultural prejudices and is still not fully convinced of the value of the arts. At a time and age when live dance and theatre face stiff competition from film and other media, I am convinced that it is increasingly important for artists to inspire audiences to create an experience that is compelling and rewarding.

As an emerging choreographer, I find myself wanting to pull apart everything I have learnt and examine it with a fresh new perspective. As I created the three projects, I realized every piece I worked on became a point of departure for the next creative process. I found myself negotiating tradition with modern; learning how to effectively organize my embodied knowledge in the traditional classical dance form. I realized any new movement vocabulary that I would discover would stem from my traditional training. I had to determine where I would want to go from there.

Through these three projects, I found the rich opportunity to reflect deeply on how I can bring about change in content, style and narratives maintaining the aesthetics of my style by pushing my own limits and bursting my own bubble of preconceived notions of what contemporary Indian dance should be. Sometimes its power is complemented with the theatrical tool of voice. Sometimes it is multimedia and technology that adds value to the work. Between dance and music, between movement and stillness, between belonging and detachment, I will continue to negotiate these in-between spaces that deepen my practice.

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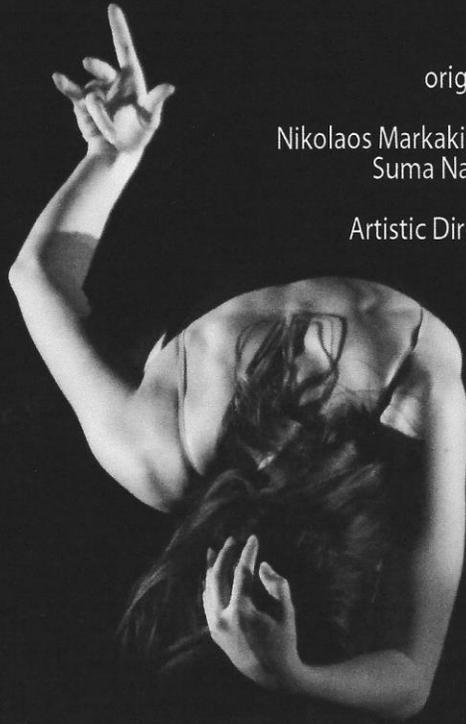


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## ***Belong***

Choreography and Performance: Suma Nair

Music: Desert Sands – Derek and Brandon Fiechter  
Ganesha – From Malabar to Morocco  
Piece for Punyah – Veena in Vienna

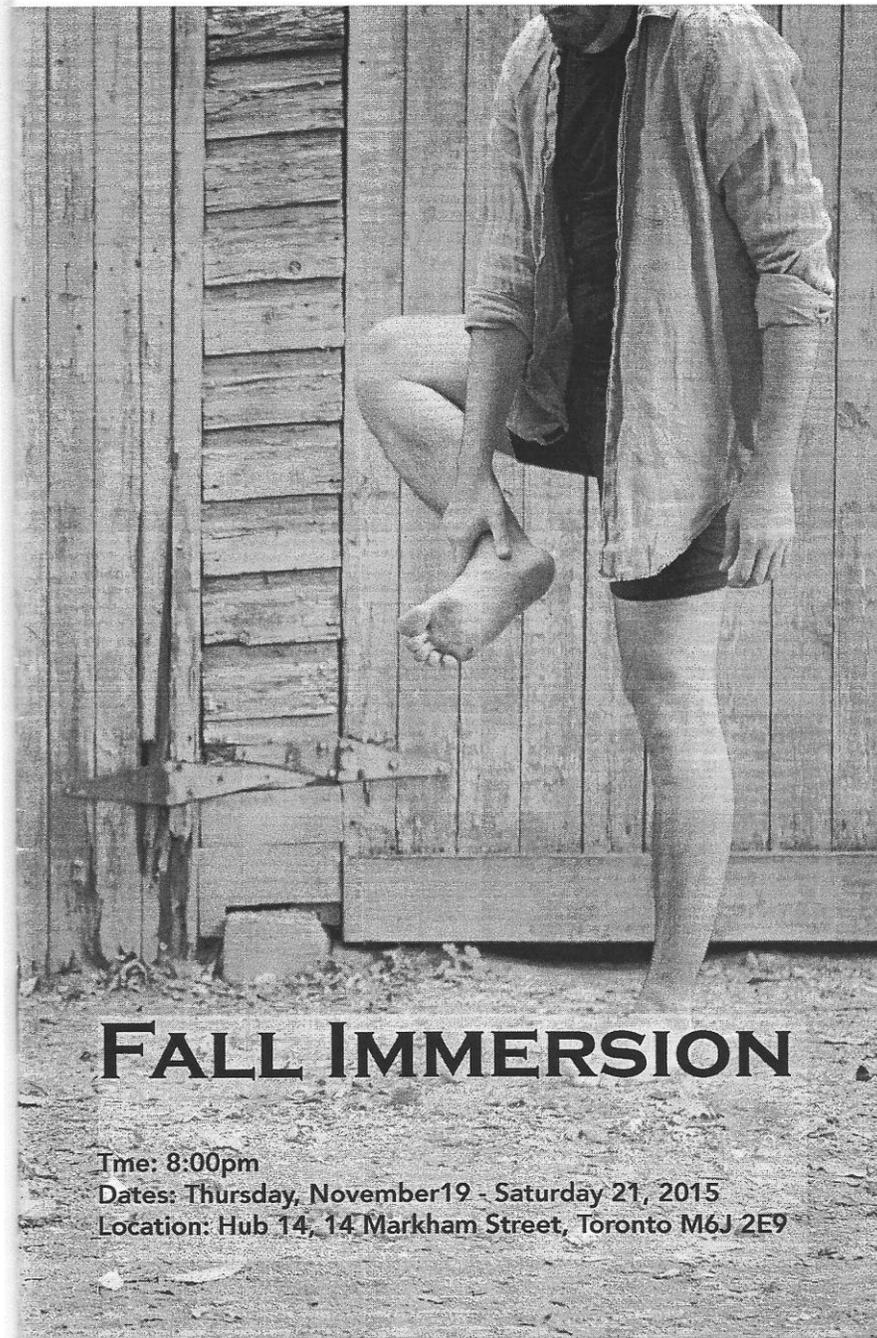
Costume: Suma Nair

### Choreographer's Note

Is home really a place? Having lived in different parts of the world, I have been moved to explore the concept of home through this autobiographical dance. Although life began for me in the Middle East where I first began to dance, my wanderlust years took me to India, my 'home' country where my love for dance flourished unabated, all through life's new chapters. Years later, love brought me to Canada. Today, as I embrace motherhood, my children hold a piece of my heart and have helped me deepen my understanding of home. But in the end, I do belong deeply to my true self. My love of dance has seen me home, and has remained my constant through all of life's adventures. My dance comes to me without question. My dance has taught me all the ways I can belong in the world.

In a search to uncover and understand the concept of home, *Belong* is influenced by personal narratives, individual perspectives and cultural memories. With this piece, I embark on my investigation of contemporary Indian dance in the diaspora. Through this practice-led research, I begin to understand and re-imagine traditional Bharatanatyam movement vocabulary and narratives, reconsidering compositional structure and choreographic choices.

Thank you: I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to my dancer friends Sheetal and Aparna for being my outside eyes as I developed the piece. I would also like to thank members of the MFA faculty William Mackwood and Carol Anderson for their support. And last but not least, thank you to my family for being the wind beneath my wings.



# FALL IMMERSION

Time: 8:00pm

Dates: Thursday, November 19 - Saturday 21, 2015

Location: Hub 14, 14 Markham Street, Toronto M6J 2E9

## ***BANDHANA – THE BOND***

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Choreographer: Suma Nair

Perfromers: Aparna BG,  
Jessica Mannara,  
& Sheethal Thamby

Music: Raag and Roll – Viji Krishnan  
Divenire – Ludovico Einaudi

### Choreographers Notes:

*Bandhana* explores the idea of female bonding - the formation of close relationships between women and the patterns of attachment between them. The piece delves into the arrays of how we connect as women – sometimes compassionate, sometimes competitive.

As part of her practice-based research exploring contemporary expressions of Indian dance, Suma reimagines traditional movement vocabulary and narratives through compositional structure and choreographic choices.

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and new works also by:  
Susan Lee, Kiera Shaw, Holly Small

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# KINDRED

Choreographer	Suma Nair
Music	<i>Divenire</i> by Ludovico Einaudi Sati by Salim-Sulaiman
Costume Designer	Suma Nair
Lighting Designer	Cole Vincent
Projection	HD footage of the Sun Solar Dynamics Observatory, NASA
MFA Committee	Susan Cash, William Mackwood, Lata Pada
Dancers	Nithya Garg, Renuka Iyer, Jessica Mannara, Atri Nundy, Purawai Vyas

In *Kindred*, I am exploring patterns of attachment between women through a process of re-imagining the rich movement vocabulary of the Classical Indian Dance form Bharatanatyam. Inspired by my own circle of women friends and life-long confidantes, I examine how women navigate a world soaked in social pressures, how they are united by similar experiences, and how their deep friendships can nourish them throughout their lives.

Special thanks to my beautiful dancers for their incredible grace and patience throughout my creative process. It has been a delight to work with such fine women who remained open and willing to move in new directions as I created *Kindred*. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to members of the MFA faculty whose careful guidance and invaluable insights helped me throughout my process. To my husband and children – thank you for inspiring me to live a creative life.

