

# Taking Indian Dance Seriously: Vancouver's "Ethnic" Dance Scene Through the Eyes of its Indian Community <sup>[1]</sup>

EVELYN NODWELL

## Introduction

Dancing and everything that's live – singing, skits, storytelling – people things are very big in India. Such "people things" are "big" not only in India, as one second generation Indo-Canadian from Vancouver suggested, but dancing, singing, and performing are also integral aspects of life for many Indians in Vancouver, and across Canada (Buchignani et al. 1985: 193-94). One need only look through an Indian family's photo album or collection of video tapes for evidence of the pervasiveness of dance. Choreographing, teaching, organizing, and watching, as well as dancing, are all a part of this experience. These activities occur in connection with home parties, weddings, and other social dances; festivals and celebrations; cultural shows, dance performances, and, more recently, competitions.

In Canadian mainstream discourse, all Indian dance styles are categorized, along with dances of other "ethnic groups", as "ethnic", "folk", or "popular". Yet these categories do not correspond to participants' categories, and they gloss over the complexity of Indian dance styles, activities, and meanings. Indian dance activity comprises a whole range of styles which are classified by participants in various ways including: "classical", "serious", "traditional" (which includes folk and classical), "semi-classical", "folk", "filmi" or "pop"), "pop folk", "just dances", "not ordinary dances", "light", and "for fun".

Dance activity has a wide range of significances. It is artistic discipline, worship, social activity, cultural demonstration, story telling, expression of joy, means of celebration, entertainment, means of having fun, and source of pride (Nodwell 1985). Producing, performing, and watching dance has consequences both intended and unintended, and sometimes even unrecognized: exposure to one's heritage; learning about India and being Indian; social interaction among Indo-Canadians; family members sharing in Indian cultural activities. Dance is a means of acquiring status within "The Community"; of communicating with outsiders; and of defining and constructing Indian culture. Dance activity and performance is one medium through which identity is represented, interpreted, transformed and lived. It serves as a link between culture and individuals, between older and younger generations, and between Indians and others (Zimmerman 1990).

Transnational links ensure that the forms and practices change and evolve to remain relevant in terms of meanings, participation, and taste. For example, dancers travel to perform, teach, and learn; videotapes of Hindi films from India have a strong impact overseas; video tapes of folk and popular dances choreographed by Gujaratis circulate among groups in various parts of Canada and North America. Cross-fertilization also takes place between styles and between practices.

Currently, most research on Indian dance in Diasporas focuses on *bharata natyam* (South India's predominant classical dance style). I will suggest that dance styles other than classical are equally valid, significant, and worthy of scholarly attention. All forms of Indo-Canadian dance generate social, identity, personal, and community consequences. This will be demonstrated by describing the range of Indian dance activity in Vancouver, elaborating on the salience of "cultural" or "talent shows", and outlining the gendered participation in dance activity.

### **Dance activity in Vancouver, B.C.**

Over the past few years, interest in Indian dance in Vancouver has steadily increased, as have opportunities to teach, learn, observe, and perform. One Hindi-speaking Hindu woman in her twenties, trained in Indian classical dance since she was small, observed that this coincides with an increased active search among her peers for cultural roots:

I think it's just become a lot more popular to really know your roots. I see a lot of people asking me now who I would never have thought were interested. A lot of the guys that just never cared before all of a sudden seem to be waking up: "There's a whole different culture out here, guys, let's go grab some." I think the younger kids are much more conscientiously trying. When we did it we sort of had it fed to us. A lot of the girls I know want to take Indian dance lessons, girls who, when they were growing up, were just not interested. All of a sudden they seem to be regretting that.



*Diwali, 1987*

A Gujarati-speaking Hindu woman who is actively involved in the organization of one of the Indian Community's major annual shows, observed that parents, too, seem to be taking more trouble to ensure the participation of their children: "The children are now more

involved...and more grown-ups are taking interest in...teaching the children.”

One indicator of the increasing interest in dance is the growth of two annual Diwali shows, one by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (a Hindu temple), and the other by the Gujarati Society. These shows feature a variety of dance items – folk, *filmi* or popular, semi-classical, though less so classical (*bharata natyam* and *kathak*). (The Gujarati Society show contains a larger proportion of folk dances, and the VHP show a larger proportion of semi-classical and popular *filmi* items). The quality, polish, and professionalism of the shows has increased markedly over the last eight years. There is a corresponding increase in the number of participants, a noticeable increase in male participation, and an increase in audience attendance. Currently, in spite of the fact that the two shows usually take place within a week of each other, they each sell out with an audience of 1200 and each show draws the participation of close to 300 dancers (only a small percentage of the audiences overlap, and only a few performers appear in both shows).

Another very different, and also highly attended dance activity is Navratri. This is an annual nine-day Gujarati festival in honour of the goddess Amba Devi, and falls in September or October. In Vancouver, participants meet every evening of the nine days in a large school gym to dance *garba* (Gujarati women’s folk dance) and *dandia ras* (circular dance with sticks) around a *mandir* [temple/shrine] of the goddess. Some, primarily older women and men, watch the dancers and listen to the music. It is a social as well as religious occasion, and girls and women come in their finest sari or *lahanga* (Gujarati or Rajasthani style skirt). Attendance on any one evening ranges from a few hundred to over a thousand dancers. Most participants are Gujarati, but others attend as well for the enjoyment. One young Gujarati woman called this dancing “for fun”, in contrast to more serious dance lessons or the commitment required to participate in shows.

Interest is related both to structures of teaching and learning and to opportunities to perform. By 1993, Vancouver supported at least four established classical dance schools, and opportunities to learn have increased since then. Three of these concentrate on *bharata natyam*: (1) Natraj School of Dancing, Vancouver’s oldest school established in 1974, and Kavital Dance School, established in 1987 with students ranging in age from five to middle-age; both incorporate other dance styles in their teaching. This allows for performance opportunities for the students in cultural shows which draw general audiences demanding visual appeal. (2) Peali Dance Academy, established in the early eighties, trains its students more exclusively in classical *bharata natyam*. Its teacher and artistic director has moved from the city, but she continues to make regular extended visits to teach, though her advanced students guide the classes between her visits. Students are encouraged to work towards an *arangetram*, a solo graduation performance. (3) Nritya Manjaree, established in

1987, teaches *kathak* dance. Each of these schools produces its own major dance drama or performance every two years or so. Students also have opportunities to perform in cultural shows and programs and for multicultural events.

Classical dancing is motivated in part by the fact that at least two or three times a year, renowned individual performers or dance troupes from India or other parts of North America visit the city. These performances often draw significant audiences, from 300 to 1000. They are sponsored by various organizations including the India Music Society, the city's two universities, the dance schools, and independent producers. Increasingly, visiting performers provide workshops or lecture-demonstrations. In 1993, India Music Society also sponsored a youth arts competition in efforts to encourage young performers.



Young Gujarati dancer,  
Navratri, 1987

In contrast to the formally organized classical schools, it is not possible to account for all the folk, popular, and semi-classical dance activity. Most of this kind of activity occurs informally and sporadically, often in the homes of individuals, and often with the purpose of preparing for a specific performance occasion. (There are exceptions in the form of well-established groups that practise and perform regularly, e.g., The Punjabi Artists Association of Richmond, well-known *bhangra* dancers). These kinds of informal activities probably engage more individuals than all the classical schools combined.

Many Indian girls and women of all ages love to dance. Women grow up seeing their mothers and aunts dance, and they are encouraged to take part at family gatherings as soon as they can walk. They learn the basic steps of folk dances through imitation and participation, and sometimes with some informal lessons in preparation for a show.

It is not only girls and young women who participate in dance. Adult women dance themselves; choreograph and perform in group dances for cultural shows, special events and temple functions; and teach dancing informally. For them, dance activity is a form of socializing, a form of self-fulfillment in the pride taken in performing and teaching, and a form of worship. The latter was expressed by a Gujarati woman in reference to *garba*, which she referred to as “not just ordinary dances”: “These dances, like Ras Lila, are different because they are based on gods. Krishna also dances with sticks with Radha and the *gopis*. That’s why you like to dance, you think you are Radha and you like to dance with Krishna.”

*Garba* and *gidda* (a Punjabi women’s folk dance) are participatory dances at many social occasions. Another popular form of participatory dance is *bhangra*, referred to by

participants as a “pop folk” style (Wong 1990). Every Indian DJ has a collection of *bhangra* music along with North American popular music. *Bhangra* is popular at events such as Indian youth dances and weddings. Indian university students expressed interest in learning more of the movements, resulting in a Bhangra Club at The University of British Columbia in 1992. According to one Sikh young woman, *bhangra* has also become a means of bringing parents and youth together: “In our culture about ten years ago there would never be any dancing at our receptions. But now, it seems all of us – people our age, younger, older – can’t live without *bhangra*. Everyone, even parents, aunts and uncles, just love to dance.”

This is true not just for Sikhs and Punjabis. It has become “global music. It’s not just Punjabis. Everybody, all Indians, like *bhangra*” (a Hindi-speaking Hindu in his twenties).

Another type of dance is *filmi* or “pop(ular)”, performed to popular Hindi film songs. Girls, and less so boys, grow up watching Hindi films and copy the moves they see. Girls use the films for ideas to choreograph their own dances:

We used to drive two hours a day to get to Regina and back and stay there for four hours while my sister and I would have our [*bharata natyam* dance] lessons. My Mom would really go out of her way to do that, because the only other culture we got was from watching Indian movies and copying dances, or listening to songs. So we kept ourselves entertained. We learned the songs and did the dances. We’d been dancing since we were quite young. (Punjabi-speaking Hindu in her twenties.)

We base our steps on the movies. We never took lessons. In our community, there’s always the Diwali Show every year. So we all just get together, pick a song and make up dances (Gujarati-speaking Hindu woman in her twenties).



Photo: Gautam Lohia

In 1985, one show organizer commented that Hindi movie dances are so popular that almost every variety show must include one. That popularity has, if anything, increased, as popular Hindi film music circulates through the community by means of increasing numbers of Indian audio/video stores and Indian radio and television programs. The *filmi* dances choreographed to this music are enthusiastically received by audiences. In these, as other dance styles, the polish of the dancing and the professionalism of the staging has steadily improved over the years. This is made possible by the presence of skilled and dedicated dancers and choreographers and by the exchange of video tapes between dance

groups in different parts of North America. Most of this is motivated by greater competition due to increased performance opportunities and larger audiences. These developments give dance and performers visibility and prestige in the community.

Films can often provide the stimulus to study classical dance, as Cunningham (1990: 177-81) has described. Yet “semi-classical” dance is a broad category in which elements of classical, folk dance, mime, and natural movements are combined. The fluidity of the style is demonstrated by an incident in which one group was invited to participate in a U.S. folk festival. The choreographer explained: “They were looking for a classical dance, and I didn’t really do classical dances. But I could easily put one together if they wanted me to. We already had one dance ready that we did last year. We just changed some of the steps, made it a little bit classical, and we went.”



*Students in a dance class*

It seems to be generally understood that the large public shows require “light” entertainment for large mixed crowds. Classical dance is not thought to be appreciated by enough people, and is not considered to be visually exciting enough for a mass show. A commonly expressed opinion is that “people get bored with classical”. This has an influence on the choices which the teachers of the classical dance schools must make if they wish their students to have the performance opportunities offered them.

Therefore the classical schools, some reluctantly, produce some “semi-classical” pieces for their students to perform at these public occasions. One of the teachers is guided by her own more rigorous definition of semi-classical in which classical movements and technique are maintained, but are adapted to popular or folk music. Costuming may be more casual, subject matter less traditional, and choreography freer.

## **Performing opportunities: cultural/talent shows**

“Talent shows” or “cultural shows” are regular components of Indian social and cultural gatherings. These shows take place on a variety of “stages”: a space cleared for dancers or singers, around which individuals sit at family and social gatherings; a small stage at a temple or community hall; a large school auditorium; a major city performance space.

Talent shows have their origins in home parties. Singing *ghazal* [light classical settings of poetry] and *bhajan* [light classical devotional songs] originally provided participatory entertainment for the adults. As the children became older, they were encouraged to dance as well as sing at these gatherings. One Hindi-speaking Hindu parent explained how “mini talent shows” exposed their children to Indian culture.

In our house we used to have parties, about twenty-five or thirty families. And once people come you want to do something more than just sit and drink. So we started singing. After eating we will sit down and let the kids sing – quite a mini talent show. Like that, the idea of a talent show [evolved], and that did a lot of good for them. This is how the children got their cultural end of things.

In family parties – organized for all kinds of life cycle events such as, baby showers (an Indian adaptation of the North American custom), wedding *sangeet* (a pre-wedding party), anniversaries, birthdays, etc. – children’s and teens’ participation is encouraged by structuring a performance into the evening’s activities. Men and women initially segregate themselves informally into different rooms. When it is time for performances, everyone gathers together to squeeze onto the floor of the living room or family room. By squeezing still closer together, a small performance space is cleared in the centre. A set of *tabla* drums and harmonium are generally available in the home or are brought by a guest. Individuals might lead some singing to which others listen or join in. Then the young people take turns performing dances or air bands. Afterwards, a buffet of primarily Indian dishes is laid out, to which everyone helps themselves. An evening often ends with *garba* – in which most of the women join – or perhaps some *bhangra*.

The major Diwali and Holi cultural shows were originally outgrowths of just such home social gatherings at which the children were encouraged to perform. Describing the show produced by the VHP, the wife of one founding member suggests that because of it, “Even if teenagers don’t go to the temple, they will still know something about the culture and their history.”



Photo: Gautam Lohia

Vishva Hindu Parishad

These shows have both intended and unintended consequences. They involve the children, provide entertainment for the adults, represent a focus for an evening's socializing, serve as an opportunity for talented youth to perform, and provide incentives to learn dances. The preparation for performances brings the participants together in a shared activity. The shows are bridges. They promote exchange between youth who have varying degrees of independence and of cultural knowledge. Those who have more cultural knowledge share it with others, and those who have less gain knowledge and exposure in an informal, fun way. They bridge generations by creating a meeting ground in which youth performers can play back culture to their parent audience. They also bridge different Indian groups insofar as they provide forums in which to "show" culture to each other in a way that is entertaining, easily accessible, and politically neutral.



*Home party 'talent show'*

### **Gender differences in dance activity**

In the context of Vancouver, women and girls far outnumber men and boys in direct participation in dancing, music, and performance. This is related to women's perceived role as culture-bearers (Nodwell 1985; 1993: 258-76).

[Parents] seem to feel the importance of their daughters learning dance for the sake of acquiring physical grace and appreciation of the art while unconsciously maintaining the female role of culture-bearer within the family tradition. Parents express the fact that if the daughters appreciate and imbibe the ideals of Indian feminine behaviour, then these values will be passed down into the next generation. (Nainpally 1989: 16)

An expectation that daughters will absorb and pass on culture is expressed by one mother. She lamented the lack of participation by boys in cultural activities, but expects women to carry the culture forward: "Those boys do not do enough to retain their culture. But we expect that when they get married their wives will make sure that they do it. In India, the boys are involved. Here the proportion is fewer men and boys." A young man in his early twenties continued to buy into the same view: "I really don't have that much Indian culture. I know it's sad but it's true. But I'm sure that the person I marry, if she spoke the language, would do most of the teaching [of our children and] she would teach me too."

Young women respondents agreed that dance is one of the things they would pass on to their daughters. As one Gujarati-speaking Hindu woman said: "I think religion would be difficult because we don't know anything ourselves to pass on. But going to Navratri, dancing, I know

I would stress that. I would want my daughters to learn Indian classical dancing.”

Men and boys are more actively involved in running the organizations which provide the support systems that in turn allow culture to be publicly perpetuated, represented, and constructed. Boys and girls are socialized into different roles. One young woman, who has only sisters, attributed the differing expectations placed on her friend and friend’s brother to a difference in interests and skills, “The distinction between Jyoti and Narendra is that Jyoti’s better at dancing, whereas Narendra is more school-oriented.” But Jyoti counters with an insistence that they have been socialized, by parental encouragement and pressure, into developing in different directions:

I think that’s a result of upbringing. Narendra was always very artistically inclined. When he was really young he used to dance our cultural dances and he used to do Michael Jackson dances just like me. But I’ve always been praised for dancing. And my school, it’s never been talked about. Even now, when I say to Mom, “I’m going to get a degree,” she goes, “Oh, what do you want to do that for?”



*Dancing the Dandia Ras, Navratri, 1992*

Over the last few years, more boys are taking part in public performance. *Bhangra* has always been a male domain. For many years, one of Vancouver's Indo-Canadian community's most spectacular and popular performing groups has been the Punjabi Artists Association of Richmond. This involved primarily Punjabi men and youth. But recently, for example, Vancouver's Gujarati Society hosted the second annual Western Canada and Seattle Garba and Ras Competition. Of the more than 300 participating dancers, about a third were young men and boys.

## Conclusion

In Vancouver, and probably other Indian Diasporas (Burghart 1987; Saran and Eames 1980) dance activity forms part of the fibre of Indian life and carries multiple meanings. Dance serves as both "model of and for" culture. As "model of" culture, dance is representation and reflexivity, embodying socio-cultural ideals, values, beliefs, and information (Geertz 1973; Singer 1972; Turner 1986). Participants themselves see dances as "a very good way of showing culture" to themselves, other Indians, and non-Indians.

As "model for" culture, participating in dance activity as dancer, organizer, or audience member is a way to be with other Indians, celebrate Indian culture, and for many is one aspect of what it means to be Indo-Canadian. Learning dance, watching Hindi films and choreographing, taking part in folk dancing, performing, helping set up, and coming to watch the show are all part of this experience (Nodwell 1991). These kinds of "people things" are integral to family life, social activities, community public and popular culture, communication with the mainstream, and links with other Indians in India and elsewhere.

It has been seen how poorly epithets of "ethnic" and "folk" apply to the complex variety of Indian dance. Related to this, there is also a continuing struggle to have Indian performing arts taken seriously as legitimate artistic disciplines in the broader Canadian society. Many students of Indian arts pursue an interest in dance or music which may only incidentally be Indian. This is made possible by a kind of "institutional completeness" in the Indian community (Breton 1964; Buchignani and Indra 1985: 183-204; Paranjpe 1986: 77-78), in which increasing opportunities for learning and performing exist. As Dakshinamurti (1991: 13) argued concerning Indian classical dance: "People tend not to take folkloric groups seriously as intellectual or emotional experiences, but look at the performance's more superficial impact. The content of the dance is thus subservient to its national origin and costume colour, and there is no expectation of professional caliber." (See also Thakkar 1987; Thakkar 1989: 11, 19)

There seems to be a reluctance to take this wealth of activity seriously as a subject for academic study. Possibly the critique of Canadian multiculturalism as merely “song and dance” causes researchers to shy away from these topics. *Bharata natyam* has been the only style to attract any serious attention. Perhaps other dance forms appear to lack seriousness. But this is belied by efforts such as the recent Gujarati Garba and Ras Competition held in one of Vancouver’s major performing arts venues. The competition was characterized by intense efforts over many months, highly sophisticated choreography, attention to authentic cultural detail, and enthusiasm of a large audience. Within the framework of an Indian diasporic public culture *bharata natyam* is only one of many dance styles and its practice takes a place among many other kinds of dance activity. These can all be examined as both artistic and social experiences as well as arenas in which cultural definitions are experienced, constructed, negotiated and contested (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988; Hall 1981).

## Notes

- 1 Research for this paper was conducted in Vancouver in 1991 and 1992, as part of work towards a doctoral dissertation: *How Do You Integrate Indian Culture Into Your Life?: Second Generation Indo-Canadians and the Construction of “Indian Culture” in Vancouver, Canada* (Nodwell 1993). Any names used here are pseudonyms.

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun, and Carol A. Breckenridge. 1988. “Why Public Culture?” *Public Culture*, 1, pp.5-9.
- Breton, Raymond. 1964. “Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 70, pp.193-205.
- Buchignani, Norman, Doreen M. Indra, and Ram Srivastava. 1985. *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Burghart, Richard (ed.). 1987. *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Cunningham, Jean D. 1990. *Classical Dance of India in Canada: Adaptation, Play – and Woman*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, William Lyon University.
- Dakshinamurti, Shyamala. 1991. “Popularizing Indian dances.” *Bansuri*, 8, pp.11-15.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic.
- Hall, Stewart. 1981. “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular.’” In R. Samuel (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Naimpally, Anuradha. 1989. “Teaching Bharata Natyam in Canada: Perceptions and Expectations.” *Bansuri*, 6, pp.15-19.
- Nimwegen, Mariken van. 1993. “3,000 years of India’s Art History in Dance Drama.” *The Vancouver Sun*, Monday, May 17, p.C5.
- Nodwell, Evelyn. 1985. “The Living Tradition of East Indian Dance in Vancouver.” Unpublished Paper. [Winning entry in Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute Student Essay Competition.]
- Nodwell, Evelyn. 1991. “Performing Reality: Dance as an Experience of Life.” *Kavital Dance School Souvenir Issue*, 3 (May), p.13.

- Nodwell, Evelyn. 1993. *How Do You Integrate Indian Culture Into Your Life?: Second Generation Indo-Canadians and the Construction of "Indian Culture" in Vancouver, Canada*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of British Columbia.
- Paranjpe, A. C. 1986. "Identity Issues Among Immigrants: Reflections on the Experience of Indo-Canadians in British Columbia." In Richard Harvey Brown and George V. Coelho (eds), *Tradition and Transformation: Asian Indians in America*. Williamsburg, Virginia: Department of Anthropology, College of William and Mary, pp. 71-94.
- Saran, Parmatma, and Edwin Eames (eds). 1980. *The New Ethnics: Asian Indians in the United States*. New York: Praeger.
- Singer, Milton. 1972. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thakkar, Menaka. 1987. *Living and Working in Canada*. In *South Asians in the Nineties*. Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, Ottawa, pp.40-44.
- Thakkar, Rasesh. 1989. "Transfer of Culture Through Arts: The South Asian Experience in North America." Paper Presented at a conference on *The South Asian Experience: Ethnicity, Identity, Migration*. Toronto.
- Turner, Victor W. 1986. "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience." Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp.33-44.
- Wong, Chris. 1990. "Bhangra Beat Drives New Indi-Pop." *Georgia Straight*, October 12, p.43.
- Zimmerman, Kate. 1990. "Dancer Gives Children a Taste of Another Culture." *Calgary Herald*, Saturday, October 13, p.D3.

***Evelyn Nodwell received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of British Columbia in 1993 for a thesis dealing with how second generation Indo-Canadians reconstruct Indian culture in Vancouver. She is currently a sessional instructor in Anthropology, and a Research Associate in the Institute of Asian Research, UBC. She has several publications dealing with questions of ethnicity and identity, and is actively involved in work in India and with the Indo-Canadian community in Vancouver.***