Enhancing the Performance Experience: 
Application of Design Concepts of Form, Space and 
Choreography in Indian Dance Theatre

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The thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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January 2007
I declare that the thesis is my account of my research and contains as its main context work, which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Saseedaran K. Anandan
ABSTRACT

The thesis revisits the key concepts of Indian dance based on the contemporary performance space by introducing design as an integral part of Indian dance, addressing these designs as symbolic or suggestive form (natyadharma) and not as a realistic form (lokadharma). In doing so, the thesis aims to explore the possibilities of further integrating design in dance so as to enhance performance experiences. The thesis argues that enhancements are a necessary development in order to express Indian dance in such an integrated way as to allow the “essence” of traditional Indian dance, its spirituality, to be maintained and enhanced.

Expounding on theories of reception, to the extent where the performer is also configured as a receiver, the thesis demonstrates how the form and the formless are conceived by the performer and the receiver. The thesis also investigates how space transformation and choreography affect both the dance and the presentation. The thesis therefore emphasises on design as an important component to investigate how performance experience can be enhanced. It is conceived as a metaphor that develops ideas in dance and how it then creates other possibilities of interactions and communications.

During research, the exploration of design and dance was conducted not only for intellectual inquiry but also to deal with the experience of performances, performers and audiences. To develop a mode of executing Indian dance, the thesis creates a perspective of seeing design and dance as metaphors. The thesis further analyses the concept of symbolic representation in space, time, form and movement, of which the thesis argues, Lord Nataraja as the ideal example of conceptual inspiration.
As a theory of theatricality the thesis argues for the extent to which the value of a performance is enhanced through a shared experience. The experience is enhanced by the multiple design elements integrated within a performance, and directed to induce *rasa* in both the performer and the audience. Therefore by heightening the performance experience, Indian dance is reflected upon as a spiritual journey enhanced.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To acknowledge, is to recognise those who have contributed towards my academic scholarship and journey. I wish to say that my acknowledgement goes beyond mere words – words that can never be expressed in writing.

However, I would like to acknowledge a number of people and the institutions who, with their encouragement and support, enabled me to develop this thesis from initial conception to the final completion.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my principle supervisor, Dr. Martin Mhando, School of Media, Culture and Communication, who guided me patiently throughout my PhD tenure to the thesis completion. To my co-supervisor, Mr. Radhakrishnan, School of Asian Studies, whose advice, added value to this thesis. With their support, I was able to explore many façades of creative and artistic experiments and endeavours. In addition, I also would like to acknowledge Dr. Jeffrey Harwood in taking time to proof-read this thesis and Dr. R. Chandrasekhar, who was there whenever I needed specific advice.

To Murdoch University where I was awarded the International Postgraduate Research Scholarship and the Murdoch University Research Studentship Award to continue my interest in creative and performing arts, and academic pursuits. I also would like to acknowledge the United States of Theatre Technology (USITT) and World Design and Performance Expo for selecting my research work for exhibition and presentation in Toronto, Canada in 2005. This opportunity allowed me to receive feedbacks and permitted me to engage with artists from around the world, as well as to present my ideas.
I also wish to acknowledge the performing arts wing of the Temple of Fine Arts International for its full support during my academic scholarship. The institution founded by His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati, generously allowed me to experiment several creative and artistic ideas in Australia and overseas. His Holiness constantly motivated and encouraged me to explore various aspects of creativity in performing arts and design. His last words to me were “grasp it, complete it and go beyond wherever it takes you.” His Holiness attained MahaSamadhi (departed from the physical body) on the 27th July, 2005.

I also express my humble gratefulness to my first dance Guru, Srimathi Bhanu Krishnan and subsequently Srimathi Kamakshi Jayaraman, and my Odissi dance Guru, Srimathi Geetha Sankaran, who have all guided and motivated me in many ways. To Gurus - the late Master Gopal Shetty and Master Sivadas, Srimathi Suriyakala, Srimathi Radha Gopal Shetty, Srimathi Vatsala Sivadas, Srimathi Malar Gunaratnam and all teachers and senior students at the Temple of Fine Arts International who have also inspired me. To the great legendary of Kathak dance, Guru Birju Maharaj and his primary student, a famous teacher herself, Srimathi Saswati Sen who gave inputs on Kathak dance and performance experiences.

My gratitude also to my extended family all over the world, I thank you for all the encouragement and support you have shown me during the four years of my PhD academic candidature.

To my mother S. Janaki, I know I would not have been able to get through this journey without your love, prayers and faith in me. To my father, the late K. Anandan, who gave me the freedom to explore the world and taught me to see the
inner dimensions of life. I will always remember his short and deep stories of his experiences as an artist in his younger days.

Finally, to my family, Suhasini, Uttara Kumari and Ashwini (the girls) and Suguna Devi my love and wife, who encouraged and supported me throughout this academic journey. Their dedication to performing arts as dancers and costume designer / creator also inspired me to further explore several artistic ideas. Their constant believes and conviction in me, made it possible for me to go beyond my own limitations.

Lastly but not least, my respect, appreciation and gratefulness to one and all who have been part of this journey – a journey that I will always cherish and remember.
DEDICATION

To His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswathi, whose guidance, teaching and inspiration, I will always treasure.

To Suguna and the girls, Suhasini, Uttara and Ashwini, who stood by me and waited long to see the end of this journey.
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GLOSSARY

Aartis: light from oil lamp or camphor that is offered to the Gods; devotional songs are also sung during this ceremony

Abhinaya Darpana: translated as “Mirror of Gestures”; Indian dance treatise on the techniques of expression and communication.

Adyakali: Goddess Kali; the supreme “trans-theistic symbol.”

Agni: God of Fire or fire in Sanskrit.

Ajur Veda or Yajurveda: written scriptures on ritualistic gestures, sacrifices.

Akasa or Akash: space, upper sky

Alarippu: Tamil word, meaning “flower-bud or budding flower”; the first dance piece in the repertoire of Bharatanatyam.

Ambamata: the Goddess as divine mother.

Ananda Tandanva: Dance of bliss; the dance of Shiva

Ananda: bliss

Arangetram: a debut public performance by a student of classical Indian dance or music.

Astadikpalas: the guardians or eight protective directional deities in space.

Atharvashirsa Upanishad: hymns or recitation in praise of Lord Ganesha

Avyakta: unmanifested sound.

Balabhadra: brother of Lord Jaganath of Puri.

Bhakti: devotion.

Bhava: expressing emotions; the “becoming.”

Bhills: tribes of Rajasthan, Udaipur and Chittaurgarh, India.

Bilva: leaf from herbal tree and associated with the worship of Lord Shiva.

Bindu: a point, dot, centre of creation

Brahma: one of the Hindu trinity; God of creation.
Buddhi: intuitive intelligence, to be awake, to know.

Chandra: lunar deity, the moon.

Chenda: cylindrical wooden drum used in rituals and dances of Kerala.

Chhau: martial art dance from Mayurbhanj, Orissa.

Chidambara Mummani Kovai: text on all aspect of Lord Shiva.

Chitambaram or Chidambaram: temple dedicated to Shiva - Nataraja, Hall of Consciousness.

Chola: Tamil dynasty that ruled southern India and part of Asia.

Cit: consciousness

Damaru: small two-headed drum shaped like an hourglass.

Darshan: sight, vision, glimpse of the divine; root word, drsh, “to see.”

Devas: Gods, deities, celestials or the “Shining Ones.”


Ganesha: Hindu elephant-faced God; Lord of Good Fortune and remover of obstacles.

Ganesha Chaturthi: special festival dedicated to Ganesha.

Garuda: large mythical bird associated with the Hindu God Vishnu.

Graphie: Greek word; the art of writing or drawing

Hamsa-Vahini: Swan as the vehicle of Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge.

Hasta-mudras: hand postures or gestures.

Himavat: lord of the mountain

Itekka: hourglass shaped drum accompanying female characters in Kathakali.

Jagannath: deity in the form of Krishna, popularly known in Puri, Orissa; nath means master and jagat means universe.
**Jivanmukti:** a state of “release in life”; eternal bliss, liberated sage.

**Jnana:** knowledge, pure awareness.

**Kailasa / Kailash:** name of a mountain, signifies Lord Shiva.

**Kalaripayattu:** martial art of Kerala; kalari, meaning “school or battlefield” and payattu, meaning “exercise in arms or to fight.”

**Kalivilakku:** large oil lamp used in Kathakali.

**Karthik:** also known as Muruga or Subramanya, younger brother to Ganseha.

**Kathak:** classical dance form of the northern states, India.

**Kathakali:** classical dance form of Kerala, India. Katha means story and Kali means play.

**Khoreia:** Greek word, meaning “dance.”

**Koyil:** Tamil word for temple, literally means, “abode of the king.”

**Ksetra or Kshetra:** place of pilgrimage or place of religious importance.

**Kuchipudi:** classical dance form of Andra Pradesh, India.

**Kundalini:** meaning “coiled up” or coiling like a snake”; a yogic philosophy for spiritual awakening.

**Kuttampalam:** Kuttiyatam temple theatre.

**Kutiyattam:** Sanskrit theatre of Kerala, India’s oldest theatre form (two millennia).

**Laya:** rhythmic expression in Indian music, time-measure or “pulse.”

**Linga:** the other name for Lord Shiva; linga, meaning, “sign”, a symbol of eternity.

**Lokadharmi:** realistic and natural presentation in Indian theatre.

**MahaShivarathri:** festival dedicated to Lord Shiva; literally means, “night of Shiva.”

**MahaSamadhi:** saints, sages who have departed their physical body.

**Mandala:** “circle” or “completion”; referred in Hinduism and Buddhism.

**Mandapa:** an enclosure, a pillared outdoor pavilion, or hall.
Mandhir: Hindu temple; man, means “inner-self” and dhir, means “dwelling place.”

Manipuri: dance form of Manipur, India; theme on Krishna and Radha.

Maya: illusion

Meru: sacred mountain, centre of universe.

Modaka: sweets wheat or rice ball symbolises wisdom, liberation.

Mohini Attam: classical dance of Kerala, known as “dance of the enchantress.”

Moksha: liberation, enlightenment.

Mula-dharam: point at the tailbone; the seed for spiritual channels.

Murtis: image in which the divine spirit is invoked, deity.

Nabhi: navel region, centre of sustaining spiritual energy.

Nadanam Ameipu: Tamil word for creation of a dance or making of dance.

Nagara: holy city.

Nata Sankirtana: special Manipur dance performed during religious rituals.

Nataraja: Lord Shiva the “king of dance.”

Natesa: another name for Nataraja

Nattuvangam: a set of cymbals used in Indian dance and music.

Natya: the combination of pure and expressive dance.

Natyadharmi: stylized theatrical presentation with the use of symbols and, gestures.

Natyasastra: the sacred science or treatise on dance.

Natya Veda: the fifth Veda / knowledge, created by Lord Brahma; the art of drama.

Nayaka: hero.

Nayika: heroine.

Nerikkan: third eye referred to Lord Shiva or the eye of wisdom.

Nritta: pure technical dance; movement, poses / karanas.
Glossary

Nritya: expressive dance depicting emotions, moods and characters.

Odissi: classical dance of Orissa, India.

Omkar: symbol representing Aum; the first sound.

Omkara: symbol Aum signify the Supreme Divine; referred to Shiva, Ganesha.

Parvati: Shiva’s consort, “she of the mountains.”

Praba: light, light rays emerging from Nataraja.

Prana: breath, energy

Purana: ancient text on Indian literature.

Putran: son, prince.

Ram Leela: stories from Ramayana.

Rahasya: secret, (referred to Chidamabaram temple)

Rasaanubhava: the relishing of the senses, aesthetic experience.

Rasa: essence, flavour, an esthetic delight; the cause of bliss.

Rasika: observer who enjoys or experiences the rasa

Rig Veda: sacred texts on hymns and literature in praise of the Gods

Rishi: a Hindu sage, saint.

Sabha: hall, meeting place.

Sabda Brahman: sound of Brahman / creation; every sound in the universe.

Sadanga: six characteristic or “limbs” in Indian painting.

Sada Siva: eternal Shiva

Sadhana: spiritual undertaking.

Sadir: formerly known for bharatanatyam

Sama: front, straight; body and limb position in Indian classical dance.

Samadhi: state of consciousness, complete meditation, “becoming still.”
Sama Veda: sacred text on music

Samashti: cosmic, macrocosm.

Sachikrita: diagonal view

Saivite: follower of Saivism; who worships Shiva as the supreme God.

Sakhi: friend, maiden.

Sapta: seven

Sarpa Sirsa: snake’s hood.

Sat: “truth, real, being, existence.”

Shakti: energy, power, Goddess.

Shani: one of the nine primary planets in Hindu astronomy, referred to planet Saturn.

Shishya: disciple, student.

Siddhi: success, attainment, accomplishment.

Silpa: artist, sculpture, architecture.

Siva Mahadeva: Shiva as supreme God.

Sloka or Shloka: Hindu prayer in verse form; phrase or proverb referring to the divine.

Sringara: erotic love or romantic love expressed in dance.

Stutis: devotional poems; songs in praise of the Gods.

Subhadra: sister of Lord Jagannath.

Sudarshana: spinning disc held by Lord Vishnu.

Surya: the solar deity; Sun.

Tala: “clap”; a rhythmic pattern in a music composition.

Tantric: Hindu religious practices for material or spiritual gain or both.

Tillai: the forest of Excoecaria Agallochat scrubs where great stories of Shiva occurred; now known as Chidambaram.
Tillana or Thillana: normally the last repertoire item in a music or dance performance; the theme of joy and celebration.

Tirtha: pilgrimage site, a means of “cross-over” to another realm.

Trisula: Sanskrit term for “three-spears”; a trident; a religious symbol representing trinity.

Udukkai: Tamil word for damaru, hourglass shaped drum.

Unmai Vilakkam: Tamil text explaining the symbolism of Nataraja’s cosmic dance.

Upanishad: part of Hindu scriptures; esoteric doctrine.

Urdhva Tanndava: the famous dance of Lord Shiva – Nataraja; lifting his right foot upright while dancing.

Vahana: vehicle that is associated with a particular deity.

Vaishnava: the teaching and practice related to the worship of Lord Vishnu and his avatar / incarnation as the supreme God.

Vak or Vac: speech, voice, language.

Vastusutra / VastuShastra: the science and art of planning a building.

Vatika: temple

Veda: religious text on supreme knowledge, wisdom.

Vedic: ancient school of Hindu philosophy.

Vibhuti: sacred ash, symbol of purity.

Vihara: “dwelling”, monastery, assembly hall, communal space.


Visarjan: immersion; festival dedicated to Ganesha, which is celebrated on the last day.

Vishnu Samhita: collected works that is akin to the dualistic philosophy.

Vishwa Vinayaka: grandeur of Lord Ganesha.

Vyakta: manifested sound

Vyashti: individual level, part of a whole, micro.
Yajna: sacrifice, offering, oblation.

Yantra: a mystical or astronomical diagram for the purpose of meditation and worship.

Yang: Chinese symbol; represents white, bright, masculine, positive, fire

Yin: Chinese symbol; represents black, cloudy, shady, feminine, negative, water
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The dissertation aims to explore concepts and ideas of design in Indian art that can be applied in Indian dance to uplift performance experience. Through the study of form and space in Indian art, it examines the importance of design as part of Indian dance theatre. It questions how Indian dance choreography ought to go beyond the physical body to express the inner dimensions of Indian art.

The arts are the epitome of what our speculative thoughts and philosophical views consciously underline. In the Indian worldview, they are also the conduits for communication and connections, and when dance and design are well executed as an extended expression, it creates another means of seeing and generates another level of experience.

Indeed, the study of religious art reveals how visual art has disseminated religious teaching, mythology and philosophy and aroused the fervor of the common people. The spiritual and ritual aspects of most indigenous and traditional practices in India have been manifested in artistic forms that use visual, performing and literary arts as their primary modes of expression. It is on this note of concurrence that we may look at Indian religious art with its icons, manuscripts and ritual accessories. However, if these arts are not understood in the correct context, it may be necessary that they are once again reestablished, revived, re-examined, re-evaluated and restored to their intrinsic vitality.

Indian dance has come a long way from its origin. Even though the traditional Indian dance performances are very ritualistic, it is now being performed in various venues
and for various occasions. The widely held beliefs that dance originated from the
Gods and should be performed in temples for the Gods are slowly diminishing. We
find more of this ancient dance form becoming popularised and performed in modern
theatres throughout the world.

Part One

Indian Dance – History

The common root of all classical Indian dance forms can be traced to Bharata's
‘Natyaasastra’, dated around the second century BC to the second century AD
(Vatsyayan, 1996). It is a common text for all the Indian dance forms and has thirty-
six chapters. The text deals not only with the arts of drama and dance, but also with
every conceivably related topic, ranging from the architecture and design of an
auditorium to minute details concerning the analysis of plots and the portrayal of
particular characters. However, a large section of the Natyaasastra discusses in detail
the subject of dance and how the various parts of the body are used in the dance
(Samson, 1987: 17). This includes the use of diverse hand gestures, body movement
and the use of facial expressions. For further understanding of their use, these
discussions are divided into different sections that address the primary and secondary
elements (ibid).

The importance of the body as the main subject of Indian dance, has in fact led to
lesser consideration being given to other elements of theatre; such as lighting, sound,
sets and venues. In fact, most performers are less concerned with the venue or even in
the set up of the performance. However, if dance was considered as originating from
the Gods, a divine perception, what would the form and space be? How can we
replicate or, in some way, reproduce that kind of mood or atmosphere of the space for such a sacred dance? These questions propose that we look at ‘other elements’ that can enhance performances and bring them to the level of the dance to the Gods. It is where not only does the dancing body play an important part, but the whole space and form within the performance is an attribution to the divine.

In many ways, while the concept of design is not new, the importance of discovering its magnitude in the application of this knowledge is what this thesis aims to discover. As Suressh Aswathi argues,

Inadequacies of structure, autonomy, and resources continue to bedevil the host of Academies established to nurture the Arts. Our cultural life generally, and art forms specifically, can gain in vigor by attending to the strengths inherent in the traditional art forms and cultural institution. To ensure continuing cultural renewal in a changing milieu, it is necessary now to organize training in the arts at the universities and to produce varied cultural materials for different audiences.

(Quoted in Saberwal, 1975: 134)

What is important in our search here is to explore how to conceptualise the separate elements of Indian dance as integral correlated manifestations. It is to determine how these elements can be used by the dancers and the choreographer / designer to create forms and artistic insights that will be experienced by diverse audiences enveloped in a given performance space. Therefore, there is a need to go back to the “roots” of performance, deep in the traditions. It is to find the essential link between Indian art and dance that will define and allow for the process of understanding dance in its spiritual dimension.

However, when we look at the revival of Indian dance and its subsequent development and growth, especially during the twentieth century, we have to keep in mind that the timeframe is, indeed, a very brief period. We can trace Indian dance
from its roots in the periods prior to the second century B.C (the upper time frame of the *Natyasastra*), through the vicissitudes that it has passed through, to its revival during the last seven decades, from its acceptance after India’s independence, to the aesthetical, historical, economic and social issues that it addresses (Bose, 2001). All these events, present a complex scenario.

With the Indian dance revival, it is expected that the audiences will share the ideational background of its aesthetic principles, upon which the performing arts rest. As Kapila Vatsyayan, one of the foremost modern scholars of Indian dance and the performing arts observes, “The aesthetic enjoyment of the classical dance is considerably hampered today by the wide gap between the dancer and spectator” (Vatsyayan 1977: 2). She further states that “even the accomplished dancer, in spite of his or her mastery of the classical technique, may sometimes only be partially initiated in the essential qualities of the dance form and its aesthetic significance” (ibid). Further, on the issues of Indian dance audiences, Vatsyayan stresses that “only the exceptional spectator is acquainted with the language of symbols through which the artist achieves the transformation into the realm of art” (ibid).

In the past, the temples in India were the hub of devotional and cultural activity space for both the performer and the audience (Gaston 1996). However, with the movement of the arts outside of the temple and into the theatre, the relationship between the performer and the audience has changed. The audiences are no longer participating as much as they used to. The performers are essentially re-enacting the objective without the spontaneity of the devotion, which would have been the case in the past. This is not unusual, as many indigenous religious-artistic practices have had to change with time to meet contemporary needs and requirements.
This vision of religion as the ultimate experience has been a core component of theatre the world over, as exemplified in works from primitive theatre (Varadpande, 1983) to the Greeks to India (Kale, 1974). However, contemporary theatre practices at times are influenced with commercial realism to the extent that they seem to have lost a sense of balance, which has been seen as a growing trend in the various media of communication. In theatre, this balance is the level of experience that a theatrical performance affords which allows not only self-introspection, but also communal affiliation. The cathartic\(^1\) experience, central to drama, is essentially an expression of the desire for balance. As Gupt argues,

\[
\text{Catharsis should not be viewed as mere relief; it could better be regarded as restoration to a state of pleasure not generally experienced […] while] the process of rasa emergence requires the removal of obstructions […]. Katharsis and rasa, with their separate points of emphasis, both begin with purification and end in delight.}
\]

(Gupt, 1994: 271-273)

As a medium of communication, the theatre proposes to bring a sort of balance at the end of each theatrical experience. Being an experience, rather than a codified language that simply conveys messages to a receiver, theatre attains a very high status in communication. Theatre allows for more than that, which is offered by other modes of communication and, even then, theatrical experiences are never similar and often require additional elements to bring the experience to every participant in the theatre. One may then ask; why does the language of communication require extra material for communication, especially since we have already accepted the fact that theatre already allows for the possibility of greater communion with spectators?

\(^1\) The study on the theory of Catharsis and Rasa is much discussed by Chaudhury, P. J, a philosopher and scholar in religion, science and the arts. Refer to his article on “Catharsis in the Light of Indian Aesthetics” (1965: 151-163), which discusses the similarities and differences of Catharsis and Rasa theories.
Essentially, the desire for the additional use of theatrical elements is to open the scope for every member of the audience to experience theatre. In the *Natyasatra*, it is mentioned that a proper dramatic performance is one that realises “complete theatrical experiences” and evokes *rasa* in the audiences (Kale, 1974).

There is also awareness among Indian dance theatre practitioners, that although the art is precious, without an intellectual inquiry it would be a meaningless exercise. Even when the practitioners have felt the need to go beyond the mythological themes and express contemporary issues, they have never lost sight of the need to understand the aesthetics of dance through the study of the *Natyasastra* and *rasa* Theory.

In the concept of *rasa*, Bharata sums up the nature of the aesthetic emotion as the unique and extraordinary delight afforded by works of art, and through the experience of which a transmutation takes place. Bharata describes *rasa* as the aspect of aesthetics and using various techniques by which *rasa* could be evoked (Vatsyayan, 1977: 8). Indeed, *rasa* is considered by all later Indian aestheticians to be the essence and soul of art (Ghosh, 1961; Raghavan, 1975). Bharata defines *rasa* or aesthetic delight in performance thus:

*rasa* is nothing but the relish of a principal or elemental human emotion, like love, pity, fear, heroism and mystery, which forms the pervasive dominant note of dramatic piece. The taste of the dominant emotion is made available by means of a number of minor and transitory emotions depicted in the piece by means of representation of characters, their physical manifestation of feelings and their surroundings or background.

(Cited in Chaudhury, P. J., 1965: 155)

With *rasa*, we find that some mental states are aroused through imagination of the environment discussed within a theatrical performance. In many ways, viewers are
stimulated by the strong impressions that have been left in their minds by the moods that they experienced in the stage representation (Tarlekar, 1991: 54-55).

Chaudhury argues that the stage representation, whether it is in the form of poetry, art object or character, creates “emotive significance” (Chaudhury, 1965:145). This emotion, he states is not the same as experienced in ordinary life. It becomes a state of contemplation that is ultimately experienced as bliss – a “different world” (ibid: 145-146).²

Gay McAuley refers to this experience as the ‘other performance.’ This “other performance” is the recognition of an experiential activity that spectators undergo in the theatre. What happens here is that by being in the theatre, the spectator is still conscious of what the actors, other spectators, the performance and his or her own experience share in that moment. The spectator’s account of the experience of the performance depends on that space and all that is experienced by all of the components that make meaning of the theatrical activity (McAuley, 1999).

Hence, the spectator participates in the performance as a co-creator, rather than as a receiver. He or she remains an individual, although the experience is essentially dependent on the communal activity that is theatre.

They [the spectators] are not a collection of separate human beings, although that is how they come to the theatre, but an entity that its own life, its own energy, its own idiosyncrasies, and it is the physical disposition of the space that sets in motion the transformation from collection of individuals to collectivity.

(McAuley, 1999: 275)

² According to Chaudhury, P. J., this is rasa and cites them as “extraordinary or worldly” and the enjoyment attained as “transcendental” (Chaudhury, 1965:145). Further, the key factor in Indian aesthetics, is that the “rasa stands for what is created by the artist as well as what is experienced by the competent audience (Ghosh, Rajan. K., 1987: 322).
Indeed, to the director Austin Pendleton, the production ought to begin with “respect for the space” (Condee, 1995: 14). This was born of the respect for the temple or church or any place of worship where theatre had its birth (ibid). In arguing his idea that theatre is “essentially a religious experience” Pendleton states,

> The place you are in is part of the experience, as in any [temple]; you have to honor that, and the audience has to feel that. They have to be reminded of the particular place where they are sitting and watching that script, because it is part of their overall experience. They’re not meant to be taken away from that. The place itself is supposed to lead them into the experience and to amplify the experience for them – exactly like a [temple].

(ibid)

I would agree, therefore, with William Condee who voices a similar opinion to that of Pendleton and argues that it is the place of worship that enhances the theatre experience and returns a sense of spirituality to the spectator (Condee, 1995: 14, 33).

Those who have ventured to experiment and extend the horizons of Indian dance are the inheritors of the great traditions and are aware of its values. The theory of Indian dance aesthetics also draws attention to the new directions in which Indian classical dance is moving. It is indicative of the desire on the part of the performers and the audience to see that the dance keeps pace with the changing times, reflecting these changes both in its content and form. Moreover, it is obvious that classical dance can co-exist with the innovative and the experimental dances.

It is said, a carpet has to be seen from above and a ceiling has to be appreciated from below and both these need to be combined in a valid co-position, as a single frame. The detail must be like a living cell, which has its own life and yet it is a part of a

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3 Indian classical dance is mainly referred as the dance form that is practiced, taught and performed to preserve and conserve the art as it was original conceptualized. The classical therefore is referred as the tradition. However, it is also noted that new developments in Indian classical dance does not necessarily mean that the practitioner is moving away from tradition. What constitute as tradition in Indian classical dance is still debateable.
larger organism. It is the connection to this perspective that will initiate a new way of seeing and, therefore, of experiencing Indian dance theatre.

For example, traditional lighting such as huge oil lamps for Indian dance and theatre, although poor in technological resources, is rich in the magical effects it creates with the aid of an imaginative spectator. A person does not have to be a Hindu or a believer to recognise that these artistic visions, creations, phantoms, and spectres or whatever name they are given, touch the spectators at the very centre of their aesthetic existence.

In fact, the aesthetes amongst us often ask ourselves through which light should one catch the moment when an expressive movement is born? In what light, for that matter, do we see the link that binds the dancer’s posture with the Chola\textsuperscript{4} statues? It is through such sculptural figurines of the great architectural temples that the aesthetic of dance has been studied.

Light in the form of sun, moon and fire, which was considered a divine power in ancient times, was propitiated as an illumination of the divine through architectural means that creates ‘glow’ on the figurines. Indeed, this means that the aesthetic beauty created by the right mood and the right effect, can be re-created by using light. In effect, links to tradition can be created by using innovative elements in a contemporary way. In doing so, it allows us to reconnect to Indian dance and its fundamental origin of communion with the divine. This is important as in Indian dance all other Indian art forms are interwoven within the dance and share a similar

\textsuperscript{4} During the Chola Empire, in India, great architectural temples and sculptures were erected. Examples of these temples are the Vijayalacholeswaram, and Tanjore Brihadisvara temples. In these architectures, magnificent designs of various forms were constructed. The marvelous Siva temple in Tanjore was also built and was considered the greatest masterpiece of South India. It is still a splendid sight to observe how this great monument was built. For further details, refer to \textit{Early Chola Temples}, by Balasubramanyam, 1971.
purpose, which is spiritual.

**Statement of Purpose**

In the past, Indian classical dance such as *Bharatanatyama (Dasiyattam), Odissi* and *Kathakali* were only performed within the temple premises and the performances were usually based on myths and legends of the Gods. The temple performance was a means for the dancer and the audience to reach God. The audiences comprised of devotees, who attended the temple for various traditional and ritualistic functions. The devotees were familiar with the stories of the myths and legends and could relate to what the dancer was trying to portray. This allowed the audience to be much more connected to the dancer and the story.

Physically, the audiences in the temple space were very close to the performer. They watched the performance with no restrictions placed on where they could stand or sit. The audiences chose the best place to follow through the journey of the dance. The dance in the temple space can be,

\[\text{practiced [...] and housed in the physical context of the temple, its immediate theatre, fused ritual-form and religious fervor into one nondualistic whole. The temple was the natural home for [...] ancient theatre, itself articulated in religious inspirations. So, it fused physical context with ideology, form with content. And the dancer symbolized this fusion...}\]

(Meduri, 1988: 4)

The temple spaces, which are adorned with symbolised sculptural and architectural forms, created the religious and spiritual ambience where the performer and the audience seek a similar journey towards communion with the divine. Image 1 highlights the close connection between the dancers, the audience and the temple space.
Since the dancer’s body is central to the expressiveness of the performance, the proximity of the audience is vital to Indian dance. This is because the ambience and the space embody the connection between performer and audience (Meduri, 1988: 4). While dance is essentially a medium of expression that communicates and conveys the ideas\(^5\) to a knowledgeable audience, it is also important to emphasise that the main objective of Indian dance is the aspiration for a spiritual journey. In that a total creation of space can potentially enhance the seeking.

More recently, however, dancers and choreographers have sought to explore new ways to enhance Indian dance and make the performance experiences more accessible to contemporary audiences, everywhere. Alongside Indian classical dance, Indian dance movement has embarked on innumerable innovations and experimentations. For example, classically trained dancers have discovered inspiration through other Indian indigenous genres, as well as martial arts traditions (Kothari, 2003). They have also begun to explore the related physical disciplines of yoga, dance and traditional arts (ibid).

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\(^5\) In Indian dance, various ideas are expressed through symbolic gestures. This ideas and gestures can evolve from various experiences that the dancer goes through while in the process of making the dance. Many of the traditional Indian dance ideas are based upon mythical and legendary stories that are familiar to the customary audience and performed in traditional sacred spaces, such as the temple.
Without a doubt, many of the innovative performances that I have witnessed in Australia and internationally, and read about in Indian dance related articles, concentrate on the physical body as the main tool for communicating the theme and meanings of the performance (which is the vital embodiment of Indian dance). Though the body remains the nucleus of Indian dance, the performance seems to have evolved, especially when presented away from its original traditional space.

Contemporary Indian dance has been revived from the temples and brought out into the contemporary world to be explored. In fact, many have experimented with the capacity of dance to express modern themes in contemporary ways. For example, Uday Shankar, widely regarded as the father of modern Indian dance, developed a unique style and choreographed works that dealt with labour issues and the struggle for freedom (Kothari, 1998: 468 - 469).

Many emerging dancers and choreographers have followed suit and have used Shankar’s examples in performances that deal much more with contemporary life, rather than with mythological themes. Classical dancers have discovered and become aware of different genres of dance forms, while creative dancers have begun to incorporate them into new dance expressions or terminology. Budding young artists have also studied and trained in Western classical ballet and modern dance. They also integrate these dance forms with the strict traditions of Indian dance styles (ibid).

However, these recent developments have prompted me to study how Indian dance was originally conceptualised and the root of its existence. It provoked me to question the many underlying connotations that are related to Indian dance, such as sculpture, painting and architecture. I began to question what the dance space was like and how and why an assimilated and ambient performance experience is crucial to the
redevelopment of this ‘wholesome experience’ in modern space. I also questioned how various symbolic and aesthetic forms are integrated to become part of Indian dance theatre experience.

**Hypothesis**

This thesis arises from an interest in the fundamental question - the creative, innovative trends and the tradition that confronts artists who are attempting to enhance Indian dance. I believe that the integration and the innovations that are happening are very good indications of the growth of traditional Indian dance. Here, tradition does not only mean sticking to what has been taught or practised for a long period. Tradition can also mean change. The change should be well executed to enable “new forms” to be explored and enhance spiritual enlightenment, which are the ultimate aims of Indian dance. Indeed, many of the classical Indian dance forms, such as, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Odissi, Kathak, Manipuri, Kuchipudi and Mohini Attam, which were originally performed in the temples and consecrated spaces, are now introduced in modern space. This space modern technology is used to portray and enhance the intended aesthetics. While engaged in such applications, however, their aims still reflect specific spiritual experiences and meanings. Through contemporary approach, innovative aesthetic ideas in Indian dance are also created.

For instance, in 2001, I attended the annual music and dance festival, and *The Other Festival* held in Chennai, India during the months of December and January. Most of the performances were created to highlight contemporary issues and showcased innovative ideas within traditional dance forms of India. Internationally acclaimed dancer-choreographer Alarnel Valli, presented verses from ancient Tamil Sangam
Poetry and related this poetry to contemporary stories of womanhood. Another performance, *In Search of the Goddess* by world renowned performer and creator Mallika Sarabhai, explored the perception of *Shakti* through classical dance, theatre, storytelling and mime. She used traditional ideas from the repertoire of *Bharata Natyam* and *Kuchipudi*, and integrated these with her own contemporary interpretations of the Mother Goddess.

In the article review of the Natya Kala (art of dance) 2002, Chennai, India, conference held in conjunction with the annual festival, one correspondent noted that the “art of choreography” in the festival offered insights into the differences between the approaches of the traditional and contemporary dancers” (Ramnarayan, 2002: FR-9). She added that both the traditional and contemporary styles engage in experimentation, arguing that the latter generally applies the principle of extension, but also attempts to re-forge experience in a wholly different, even alien, visual, auditory and emotional context. On the other hand, “the traditional dancer relies on the roots, guru-parampara – in other words – the Given- the heritage extensions” to communicate the dance (ibid).

Following this train of thought, I would suggest that there is a need to create Indian dance performances that balance contemporary extensions with a rich traditional foundation. This, I argue, can only be achieved if the traditional art forms are not jeopardised by the various techniques used in the performance. Instead, the contemporary approaches should be well integrated with tradition.

Hence, it is timely that further study and investigation be undertaken into the use of the ‘other elements’ that are necessary for the growth of Indian dance. This dissertation on *Enhancing the Performance Experience: Application of Design*
**Concepts of Form, Space and Choreography in Indian Dance Theatre** will examine the ‘total experience’ of a performance, rather than just the aesthetic impact of the physical movements of the dance. The thesis calls for a reflection on the total or wholeness of the theatrical experience. This wholeness is the visual force that bursts out forming multiple energies that can be absorbed both by the dancer and the audience.

By bringing together various audio and visual enhancements, that is, the design, lighting and sound, dance can be developed to produce an immersive experience as a whole. The enhancing should also include the expression of the physical body as an individual, as well as a group, in the context of using the other elements. Therefore, the performance is seen as a total frame of a pictorial performance (Samson, 1987; Nakra, 2003). Scholar Kapila Vatsyayan, in her book, *Dance in Indian Painting*, suggests that a study of the traditions of Indian painting is essential for a better understanding of Indian dance and theatre. The pictorial expression in the art identifies the manner in which the theatrical arts and dance come together, where each art entangles with the other on levels of content, form and technique (Vatsyayan, 1982: x).

Every element of enhancement needs to be studied and analysed to reveal the specific meanings that embody Indian dance expression. The performance is treated as a kinetic expression of the dancer and dance, exploding as perspectives in space, where line and colour, mass and volume play a significant part. The purpose is to experience the performance in a total sensorial form as summed up by the famous quote "a picture says a thousand words". These “picture forms” can be brought to another dimension, which encompasses design and movement in time space momentum,
where words as lyrics and music are also contained.

The observation and argument for visual enhancements will also cater for the understanding of a total aesthetic pleasure. To be sure, John Dewey says, whereas the word “artistic” refers to the act of creation, the word “[a]esthetic” indicates “perception and enjoyment” (Dewey, 1958: 46). Indeed, it is the purpose of this dissertation to discuss how to enhance the visual / aesthetics performance experience with artistic creations. This is to bring about the ‘essence’ of emotions to be experienced through the performance.

In fact, the aesthetic ‘relish’ we experience and enjoy in an artistic production is what is called ‘rasa’ or sentiment in Sanskrit dramatic theory (Pandit, 1977). It is argued that through this ‘rasa’ we can be elevated to a higher plane of experience, attaining a divine communion with the “ONE”, which was indeed the original purpose of Indian dance. This dissertation suggests that to express ‘rasa’ in this limited way is to reduce ‘rasa’ to a mechanical concept. ‘Rasa,’ in a more critical sense, is enveloped in all fine arts. If design in space is considered an art form, I believe that it could also be part of the enhancement or embodiment of expression conjured up as an added aesthetic relish in performance. Sneh Pandit argues that any artwork that produces rasa has uniquely moved the audiences’ experience and thereby the ‘creative energy’ resonates in the work of art creation (Pandit, 1977: 11).

Ananda Coomaraswamy, Kapila Vatsyayan, Uday Shankar and other dance scholars and practitioners speak about dance as an imitation of nature's beauty. If that is the case, it also ought to address how other elements enhance and reflect each other’s beauty in nature. For example, when we see beauty in a river, or the ocean, or landscape where the rays of the sun enhance all this beauty, we are not only seeing
the beauty in what we want to see, but we are also seeing the beauty as a whole experience of nature. Thus, the beauty we experience is a consequence of the interrelationship between the sunrays and earthly space.

Accordingly, Indian dance, too, can be experienced through the interrelationship of the various Indian art forms. I want to argue here that the need to express the aesthetic beauty as divine is the primary focus embodied in all Indian arts, and the process and purpose of dance is to reach that perfection. In this sense, perfection is not only achieved through the application of techniques, but also through the ‘essence’ of the performed experiences.  

All divine aspects of dancing have this central theme for the countless souls who seek the absolute Supreme (Khokar, 1979: 16). Indian dance was a source of spiritual means by which to attain ‘moksha’ or salvation. In this context, such an association of the divine and dance can only be achieved and preserved as a sacred encounter. We now understand that temples were built to celebrate dancing Gods and deities that related to myths and legends. Dr. Sunil Kothari, a dance critic, further states that the institution of the Devadasis, the servants of the Gods, was established to dance in the temples and reinforce the continuity of Indian dance and to preserve the art. It relates much with the intimate association of dance with religion and ritual practices (Kothari, 1979: 23-29).

On this profound ground, one such institution where art and dance is treated as aspiring for the ONE is the Temple Of Fine Arts. Its motto, “Arts just for the Love of It”, encapsulate the idea that art is sacred and divine and that through the offering of

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6 In Indian dance, various techniques are used to interpret and portray the theme or meaning of a particular dance. However, the ‘essence’ for such practice is to become one with the created work. This can be said to revere the art as divine adoration / the supreme spirit (Orgon, 1975: 11-14).
the fine arts, one achieves spiritual evolution by serving the arts with love (Jit, 1988: 63 – 65, 76). 

With these precepts in mind, I approach the research process with the utmost of respect - not only in deference to the Temple of Fine Arts and its Guru, but also in acknowledgement of the knowledge gained from my association with the institution. The experience of mounting experiments with the group provided an opportunity to expose Western / contemporary viewers, as well as Indian viewers, to religious and cultural values. It also allowed me the opportunity to explore theatre not merely as performance, but something more akin to the attainment of enlightenment through practice. Through the use of space with sets, images, sound, lighting and the dancer, the performances deliberately fostered a spiritual dimension. Every element in the performance was designed to make the spectator immediately realise that the performance is of spiritual importance.

The projects that are described in this thesis incorporate the productions and experiments I have designed and created with the Temple of Fine Arts. The projects not only involved dancers, teachers, choreographers, technical experts and volunteers, but also included conceptual comments from a revered spiritual Guru. His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati is not only the founder of the institution, but also the inspiration and guide for the many past productions showcased by the Temple of Fine Arts, during the years between 1982 and 2005. Even though His Holiness has left his physical body (MahaSamadhi), Swamiji, as he is lovingly called is believed to be the

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7 In 1981, the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) was officially formed with the guidance of its founder H.H. Swami Shantanand Saraswati and with the assistance of dance maestros Master Gopal Shetty and his wife Radha, and Master Sivadas and his wife Vatsala. The Temple of Fine Arts with its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur and branches in Penang, Malacca, Johor Bahru, Singapore, Perth, Chennai, Coimbatore, Sri Lanka and in New Jersey (USA), continuous to evolve as an institution that strives for service and artistic excellence in dance and music; producing a number of major and minor traditional and contemporary performances every year. To-date, the Temple of Fine Arts has produced numerous dance productions based on Indian, Malay, Chinese and Western classics.
continuing force behind every activity that takes place at the Temple of Fine Arts.

Returning to Indian dance, I hypothesise that although traditional Indian dance performances have been brought out from the temples and sacred spaces to public and contemporary arenas there is still something missing that can contribute to the total experience of a performance. So far, the body has been the core element represented in the dance space. However, there are other elements in the dance space with which the dancer interacts either physically, visually or mentally, that affect the dancer and thereby also affect the dance. Further, audiences in the contemporary space who witness the dance have not been presented with the representational elements that are found in the traditional space. To argue on these points, the theatre technique of Indian dance (\textit{Natyasastra}), which is still practiced today, holds that various theatrical techniques can be used, provided the ultimate aim is to provoke an aesthetic experience in the audience.

Likewise, Indian visual arts, which have rich cultural aesthetics, create a strong impact when synchronically integrated with Indian dance traditions. Indian art and dance perceived as symbolic can be incorporated, therefore, to produce a symbolic amalgamation in performance space.

Hence, design elements, which are necessarily represented by their symbolic forms, can be applied within the contemporary space to recapture the essence of Indian dance theatre. Therefore, I argue that by applying the various design elements to an Indian dance performance in a harmonised way, an enhanced aesthetic experience in

\footnote{Here, traditional space is referred to the presentation of Indian dance in its native or original space and context, i.e. within India. These spaces are temple spaces or temple theatres and specially built performance spaces that are designed for ritualistic purposes too, where audience are also part of such undertakings. For further details, refer to the article “The Scenography of Traditional Theatre of India (in Indigenous India)” by Aswathi, 1974.}
the audience can be achieved.

**Organisation of the Thesis**

This dissertation examines the processes by which one can enhance theatre experience by relating the principles of applied research, putting theory into practice, and making available resources to address the needs of a researchable environment. One can define applied research as the rigorous examination of a particular phenomenon to determine whether its properties are appropriate to a given practice, whereas basic research investigates conditions without any necessary intention to applying the outcomes to some particular human need or want.

The addition of a practical component to this research is a result of the purposeful enquiry into the type of enhancements that can extend theatre experience into the spiritual experience encompassed by classical Indian dance performances. Indeed, the design component of this dissertation is just as important as the conceptual component. Design elements are considered to be of great importance to the experiential factors exhibited by Indian dance and it is argued here that their enhancement will invariably effect both audience and theatre practitioners.

**Methodology**

My research utilises three principal organising methodologies. First, I have attempted to bring out some novel and more definitive information and interpretive positions with regard to Indian dance. This research endeavour is important given the widely disseminated knowledge about classical Indian dance that is abundant in academia.
Therefore, library research has been a major constituent of my research allowing me the opportunity to reflect on what has been the interpretive enterprise of Indian dance and theatre over the years. Indeed, as Dennis Kennedy has argued

“...one of the traps in mapping Indian theatre has been to duplicate the notorious colonial divisions of Indian history into three distinct periods - Hindu, Muslim, British... Even without the crudities of such chronology, there are empirical inconsistencies, not least because the so-called living traditions of Indian theatre and performance in both the classical and folk sectors have survived over centuries. Indeed they have coexisted and interacted in diverse ways with the processes modernisation, industrialisation, and secularisation that are far from being uniform in all parts of the country.”

The interpretive enterprise that has made Indian theatre so adored, often also revealed the underlining conceptual perspective of the study, rather than the epistemic premise and essence of the theatre activity. I have relied, therefore, on library research to discover the lesser-known interpretive endeavour that highlights theatre as a communion that gives insight and appreciation to indigenous theatre thought processes. I have not spent as much time as I would have liked on discussing the paternalism and condescension from western educational perspectives because that view has been flogged too often to merit any further insight. Suffice to note that what I have attempted to do here is also not to fall prey to the romanticising of indigenous knowledge, but acknowledge the many different ways of theatre presentation / practice.

Studying the complex and intricate theatre history and dance texts away from India was only made possible due to my many trips around South East Asia and India, where I was able to take part in many festivals, theatre productions and innumerable discussions around contemporary practices surrounding classical Indian dance performance.

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Further, throughout the tenure of my scholarship on this study, I was able to visit India four times and since I am from Malaysia and Singapore, I have been able to visit these countries, where Indian theatre practice is very much alive because of the substantial Indian populations in those countries. The material I have been able to collect during those trips has been part of my primary research. I have relied heavily on interviews with theatre practitioners, dancers, gurus and audiences of all ages, as well as newspaper reviews of productions that I undertook as part of the research. This research was intended to capture the sort of appeal or experience that the interviewees went through during the performances. The aim was to find the determinable impact of the design elements built to enhance specific emotions and experiences of the performances.

In order to do that, I also surveyed people in Singapore, Coimbatore and Hyderabad to collect data from dancers and other dance theatre exponents in those locations where the performances were held. I was able to apply the creative concepts to two different performances in the various places. First, is the production of *Vishwa Vinayaka* in Chennai, Hyderabad, Coimbatore, Mumbai, Singapore and Perth, and second, the creation of a floating stage and the performance of the *Bhill* dance in Kashi. They all differed in their approach depending on the cultural environment and technical requirements.

A number of different recording methods were used for the research. For the performances in Kashi, I also used email questionnaires, while in Singapore, Coimbatore and in Hyderabad I also employed visual recordings of the performances, as well as the interviews. I have also used the reviews by theatre critics in Kashi, Hyderabad, Singapore and Coimbatore to add to my research data collection.
A major source of the research is the application of my hypothesis through a number of textual developments. These included:

1. The development of a performance text based on the *Vishwa Vinayaka* CD by the music composers and conductors, brothers Atul and Ajay Gokawale of Mumbai.

2. Drawings of the designs for the performances at the various places. In Kashi, I made drawings based on the streetscape of the Ghats and the actual ritual venues.

3. I also employed experiments to assess the use of light through projections and lighting of actual locations, models and architectural sculptures. The models have been developed into animated 3-D representations to allow the viewer to enter the space in a more visual perspective.

By employing the various elements in methodology, the aim is not to create formulas of applications, but to explore and experience the process itself. Nevertheless, the methodology is an enquiry into the emotions experienced as one progresses through the multiple layers of a dance production.

Finally, this project proposes an *Action Research* methodology. The group to be studied - The Temple of Fine Arts theatre group - has not been involved in the planning of the project from the outset, so the project plan does not fulfil the Practice as Research (PAR) paradigm (O’Neill et al, 1999, p200). However, it was anticipated, as it indeed did happen, that the group would make a significant contribution in both the data gathering and evaluation of the enhancement aspects of the research project. Thus, the project accedes to the Action Research theoretical model as proposed by Levin (in Greenwood, 1999: 33), Co-Generative Action Research Model:
The option proposed by Levin portrays a more comprehensive structure of the respective roles of the researcher, the group and their tasks. I have also applied action research parameters to assess some of the creative outcomes of the research projects I have undertaken within the period of the thesis.

To be sure, empirical research has expanded greatly over the past sixty years to include creative and collaborative forms of new knowledge and social change. Those who use Action Research (AR) attribute its origins to Kurt Lewin, social psychologist in the 1940s, who “promote(d) and popularise(d) the idea of studying things through changing them and seeing the effect” (Banister et al, 1994, p.108). Through the many years of its application, we have come to identify many different paradigms; however, they all essentially endorse the common structure of:

1. Problem identification, leading to
2. collaboration with the identified subject group to which will
3. work on gathering new information (research) in order to produce possible solutions to the problem, which are then
4. put into action and evaluated, which then
5. enables a collaborative review of the
original problem and refining of the definition that will lead to (6) continued evolution in the learning process and so on it goes.

(Banister et al, 1994; van Beinum, 1999; Levin, 1999)

The main distinction here is the requirement for collaboration and the extent of that collaboration with the group being researched. In this case, the group that was being “researched” was the community of performers and attendants and audiences to the theatrical performances by the Temple of Fine Arts in Perth and overseas. From the beginning, this group was made aware and were conscious of the problem that was being defined by the research, as well as the research design. With regard to the enhancements infused in the productions, many of the decisions were made with the participation of the group. Further, with the understanding that the group and its leadership would be included in decision-making and the final evaluation that would occur in the research.

Data Analysis

Following qualitative methodologies, the research endeavours to reveal the until now, hidden and unconsidered issues regarding the theatrical experience of Indian dance. Indeed, the research will explore the attitudes, emotions, sensitive issues, opinions, conceptions, relationships and processes as well as contexts by which theatrical experiences can be enhanced to reveal a higher ideal than previously experienced. During the course of the research, I undertook a number of projects and used data from one production to inform another and, thus, derived active data on the intended enhancements.
In the projects undertaken, I had two different data providers: the dancers and the audiences. In many ways, the dancers formed the sample group since I had easy access to them and spent time with them all through the research period. This was important especially with regard to the case studies where the pre-understanding of culture, language and religious edicts enabled me to assess the experience of the intended effect through the enhancements undertaken.

In collecting data, I used interviews and observations, which are critical in Action Research. In order to gain understanding of what the dancers and audiences experienced, I used open-ended questions to probe the individual’s responses to the performance and setting of the experience that was to be enhanced. Being an ethno-centred group, the research settings were carefully observed and described to reveal the "realities" of their experiences, which differed from their “earlier” experiences.

I was extremely careful to integrate the performers and the audiences into the enhanced setting without disrupting or affecting the basic precept of the performance. Since the intention was to change the experience of theatre while being part of the process, the performers were a good group to observe when I was testing my hypothesis. Indeed, it was the process by which the data was collected. Central to this research was the fact that I was also a core participant of the research.

In most of the performances, I was the creative director, choreographer, designer / visual artist and one of the dancers. This enabled me to oversee the design and choreography application in the projects undertaken. It also helped me to continuously identify the specific needs of my investigation and record and reflect upon the various theatrical applications throughout the process. I also employed people to record all the performances with video cameras and received feedback from
colleagues, fellow dancers, production crew and members of the audiences.

Essentially, most of the time, I investigated people’s conceptions of the enhanced phenomenon through in-depth interviews with a few, but probing questions repeatedly throughout the research period. My aim was to identify variation in conceptions from one project to another and explain how different representations of conceptions related to one another through the experience described.

The Structure of the Thesis

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One is divided into two parts. It includes the Introduction and Literature Review to the thesis, briefly defines all areas of concern based on this study. Thus far in Part I of the Introduction, I have discussed the changing role of theatre in the world with focus on the status that Indian classical dance still holds in Indian cultural life.

The chapter begins with reflections and analysis on the changing environments of theatre in terms of its concept and practice. I also examine the sources of theatre received from cultural impulses and their myriad inputs and suggest the direction that Indian classical dance form is taking or is essentially programmed to take as it progresses as a mediated form. I further discuss the hypothesis and the methodology to develop the thesis argument. In part two, the chapter will centre upon the literature, affording review of contemporary discussions, practices and reflections on Indian theatre and the place of Indian art in communicating conceptual ideas.

Chapter Two emphasises on the visual representation of form in Indian art and dance and studies the symbolic interpretations that express certain meanings in Indian art.
Therefore, this chapter will also focus generally on symbolism in Indian dance and, subsequently, examine symbolic forms in Indian temple architecture. Particular attention is paid to the symbolic visual forms associated with the Angkor Wat Temple\(^\text{10}\) and the Lotus Temple. The representational form of the iconography of Lord Nataraja, the Lord of Dance is also explored. This icon has been dated to being many centuries old. It is one of most amazing conceptualised sculptures ever crafted. Until today, no other dance sculptural form comes close to this incredible icon. What is in this form that captivates every dancer, every artisan and many art lovers all over the world? It is intended that the study of the iconography of Lord Nataraja will yield a strong standing of the thesis emphasis to argue why icons and symbolic representations can and will produce some effect on the viewer. It also will generate enquiries on how these marvellous visuals are an “extended expression” of an artist.

Through research, we know that this form of Lord Nataraja has been produced and crafted in many ways by using various materials and mediums. This sculptural form has evolved in its form and texture over the centuries, however, of all the forms, the one made of bronze stands out. How and why such a great symbolic icon appeared to the very first artisan who created Lord Nataraja is puzzling. Nevertheless, according to a Hindu treatise on dance, we understand that this form represents the very essence of the universe in movement. Whatever the creator thought of in projecting the essence, it nonetheless produced an aesthetic form. Its grandeur has inspired great historians, scholars and scientists to unravel the formless state within the form of Lord Nataraja.

\(^{10}\) Even though Angkor Wat is situated in Cambodia, it is basically designed in accordance to Indian architecture concepts and is dedicated to the Indian God, Lord Vishnu. Its architectural design consists of sculptures and panels that relate to myths and legends from Hindu text (Roveda, V., 2002: 11, 12 & 19).
This chapter is integral to my research because my thesis discusses and highlights design components and philosophical concepts that exist in the iconography of Lord Nataraja. The thesis analyses the concept of symbolic representation in space, time, form and movement, of which Lord Nataraja is the ideal example. The chapter will further relate design to elements in the performing arts, that is, the sound, the lighting, movement and form, which are represented in the icon of Lord Nataraja.

With much reference to scholars who have actually studied the iconography of Lord Nataraja, I wish to explore its symbolic concepts in a different manner. I have in that manner taken Lord Nataraja himself as the motivational factor for the purpose of this study. For me, as a dancer, Lord Nataraja is the ultimate form that is conceptualized as a creative force-design representing the universe in constant creation and motion. This in itself is dance.

The emphasis on such ‘extended expressions’ in other forms is to enhance the performer’s and audience’s experiences, as well as the overall performance. In any case, the ultimate aim of this chapter is to refresh previous thoughts and remind us of the ancient art forms and their highest purposes.

**Chapter Three** examines how space transformation affects the performance experience. The chapter will discuss the ideas and identity of space from the Eastern and Western perspectives. The study will explore the ancient caves, temples and performance spaces. It will also address the issues of space that are conceived and practiced in traditional and modern space.

From the study of *Form and formless* and the study of *Space transformation*, **Chapter Four** investigates how these elements are then presented as part of dance
choreography. Thus, the chapter focuses on the various elements that are used as mediums to express a particular theme or meanings by way of introducing different mediums.

In order to understand its implications, the term choreography will first be defined. This will be done through the lenses of the West and the East. Through understanding this chronology, the chapter will then analyse how prominent artists of Indian tradition, experiment with other mediums in their productions. This study aims to see how by way of introducing design elements, the dancers will able to express and enhance the performance to heightened experiences. Hence, the chapter will focus on three dance legends – Uday Shankar, Rukmini Devi and Chandralekha – who have contributed immensely to the growth of Indian dance, not only in India, but also on to the world stage.

By studying choreography, the thesis aims to extend the idea of Indian dance performances to integrate dance with design mediums. The integration here is not meant to jeopardise dance traditions; rather it is intended to enrich the tradition. Traditions here also involve all other art forms that can be incorporated within Indian dance, and yet the essence of the dance and its meanings must not be lost to the reader and viewer. Thus, the design elements in choreography are conceived as symbolic mediums that integrate well with Indian dance, which is also symbolic expression.

Beyond the traditional dance forms, the chapter will delve further into how contemporary Indian dance examines the ways in which dancers, choreographers and designers convey contemporary issues. It looks at new dance repertoires and new ways of presentations. The analytical components would therefore highlight how certain contemporary portrayals have somewhat provoked absence of the divine. It is,
to me, the divine feeling, which was the very essence of Indian dance performances.

For many years, classical Indian dance strictly followed a traditional repertoire. Now, this has changed. The repertoires are now much more related to the issues of modern society, so as to bring the performance closer to contemporary audiences. I would like to take this chapter beyond this and see how traditional repertoires can be performed using contemporary visuals and still retain the traditional values.

In order to explore the concepts that are discussed in the chapters on form, space and choreography and substantiate the thesis, Chapter Five will present the first of the two case studies. The first case study is the performance of ‘Vishwa Vinayaka’ - a dance portraying the grandeur of the Hindu deity, the elephant God, Lord Ganesha.

The purpose of the case study is to see how symbolic and extended visuals uplift the music composition, the lyrics, the presentation of Ganesha and, last but not the least, the ‘experiences’ of the performer and the audience. It re-examines the symbolic forms and re-constructs the forms to produce a visual experience in performance space. Again, these external visuals are analysed to link back to the very source of the divine. The case study will not concentrate on the study of Ganesha as a whole, but its concept is addressed to discuss what and how the ideas can be represented.

Chapter Six presents the second case study. It discusses the creation of a floating stage in the space of the river Ganges, in Kashi, India. The project examines how the existence of a sacred place, such as Kashi, generated the ideas of the design concept to create the floating stage on the banks of the Ganges. It also looks at its ancient form and the beliefs of Hindus who embark upon a pilgrimage to this land of liberations. It will also discuss what this means to a commoner, a seeker or to a
performing artist. In doing so, the project aims to transform the space to a visual
design, which corresponds to concept of Kashi and to the symbolic ideas of the
MahaShivarathri festival.

Within this project, there will also be a description of a tribal dance performance, the
Bhill dance, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The project will showcase how this
tribal dance presentation can stimulate visual and other artistic dimensions as dance
expression, and evoke an experience.

Both case studies, that is Vishwa Vinayaka and Kashi Floating Stage will interrogate
the many other personnel and artists who were involved in the projects. The
questionnaires and interviews will be utilised to assist in critically examining the
conceptual ideas and their experiences by audiences.

The two projects are very important because they differ in the implementation of the
experiments required for the thesis. The production of ‘Vishwa Vinayaka’ was held in
indoors, in an auditorium, while the performance on the floating stage in Kashi was
held outdoors. Not only did the venues, places and times differ, but so, too, did the
audiences who witnessed the performances. The two projects, similar in their
aspiration towards the divine, are analysed in terms of an artistic expression aimed to
achieve an enhanced performance experience.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis. It will discuss innovation in Indian dance
resulting from the two case studies. It will also further study other possibilities of
creating and representing Indian dance and its symbolic concepts. This will show how
artists and other personnel involved in an Indian dance production can read the
performance differently – a new way of reading the text and its visual representations.
It is, in fact, not a new way. It has always been there from ancient times seen by great rishis, the sages. Now, we are rediscovering to reconnect and to reach the state of ‘moksha’, or liberation.

In order to evaluate the importance of theory and practice, the dissertation consists of two parts, one written and the other visual. The DVD which is attached to this dissertation ought to be viewed together with the written case studies. The visuals presented in the DVD highlights the various concepts that were applied to create the intended expressions in the production of Vishwa Vinayaka and Kashi project. Through the analysis of the written and the visual, the dissertation aims to show how, what and why the integration of design and dance is crucial to the development of Indian dance theatre. The significance for such presentation through DVD is also to engage the reader to experience the ideas within the performance and the dance itself.

**Limitations of Research**

Given that I have adopted an Action Research framework, I was faced with a number of unique challenges and limitations. It was a challenge for the dancers to reflect on their individual dance aesthetics and articulate what they felt, while maintaining the drive and energy needed to meet their own understanding of dance at this stage in their own lives.

I was fortunate to work with enthusiastic, talented youth, community leaders and crew. The committee members’ insights were valuable, given their first hand knowledge of the dancers who were surveyed and added clarity and context to the statistics - revealing more in our final results. On the other hand, having more youth involved in the project added richness and diversity. However, as usual, it was
difficult to connect with the youth since they were not entirely cognisant of the importance of the research.

One of the major constraints of the research is that I cannot assume results can be generalised to another population. The resulting data is applicable only to Indian dance and possibly to no other Indian art form or any other cultural art form. Sometimes the research results only tells one at what stage the people are in their conceptualisation of Indian art and it may be difficult to understand their viewpoint thoroughly. The diversity of interest in the researched audiences was also another constraint, since some of the members of the audiences and even other practitioners felt the research was mere westernisation of a culturally specific art form. Thirdly, one can appreciate that interviews and analysis are very time consuming often involving transcription of videotapes and analysing text (or other evidence) for themes, concepts and variations.

Finally, being an ethnically based narrative, reflections and conclusions of the researcher may be considered only a part of the narrative and not universally applicable. However, the approach can be a subject of interest if perceived from a different angle. In fact, it had created questionings among westerners that modern and contemporary design approaches can be seen through another form that has deeper meanings and not just the externalisation of such a work of art. The important contributing factor is that the approaches were of 'Indianness', which was brought together towards enriching the aesthetics of Indian arts.
**Conclusion**

Whether we are writing about dance in general or writing about sculpture, architecture, painting and music, one thing we have to understand is that in Indian dancing everything is interconnected. Further, this interconnection is extended to connect with nature and the universe, whereby we argue that where there is matter there is movement and there is dance. One of the drawbacks we find today in the modern world with regards to dance is an inability to experience the dance as it was previously experienced as a connection with nature’s dynamic force seen as divine forms.

Dance, which originated from the temple, was not to be confined to dance within this temple space but to seek connection with the space, where the divine forms are also consecrated / placed. Thus, the thesis aims to try to reconnect the essence of Indian dance which was to experience movement in every element in space and therefore dance becomes a divine movement. Such a concept of dance in its highest form is what our ancestors discovered and thus produced the marvellous Shiva-Nataraja icon and the Chitambaram temple. Both were produced to propel the mind beyond normal perception. They are metaphors of the Indian theatre in experiencing forms and spaces, which again is reflected as the “cosmic dance.”

In many cultures, dance, which originated from the natural expression as nature’s movement, was created symbolically to be presented as an extension of emotional expression or feeling. What Bharata’s *Natyasastra* conveys is that, there are many layers of understanding within the inner dimensions of movement and expression, but the ultimate movement is to seek for that connection, for moksha / liberation in the divine.
Therefore, the thesis methodology explores the possible ways that ultimately culminate into a state of experiencing the Indian dance performances in a contemporary space. The various methods used as experimentations in the thesis are seen as the whole with interconnections and interlinks between the different aspects of Indian arts. As argued by Kapila Vatsyayan, studying Indian traditions should result in an “organic whole” (Vatsyayan 1997: 3). Such in-depth study, I would argue, can only be achieved by implementing and expressing Indian art in its various media thus seeing what Vatsyayan considers as its “essential relationship of interconnectedness and interdependence and over layering” (ibid). Each method, approach and discussion in the thesis is continuously proposed to engage Indian art in its myriad forms of interrelationship, which ultimately aims to invoke an enhanced performance experience.

I would like to emphasise here that the discussion and the arguments of the thesis are considerably based on the methodology of the practical applications which are analysed in Chapters Five and Six – the case studies. As regards to this research method, the design application along with the dance follows what Peter Downton expressed: “Design is a way of inquiry, a way of providing knowing and knowledge; this means it is a way of researching” (Downton, 2003: 1). Further, as Boner observes in the Indian art of *silpa*¹¹, "Although working in a different medium it has equal power of evoking a vision of ultimate Reality, of the eternal divine Law governing the universe, of penetrating into the essence and truth of Being" (Boner, Rath Sarma et al, 1982:4)

¹¹ Unlike in the West, the concept of *silpa* in India observed as fine arts is also generally applied to practical art. Both are considered as having similar approaches. Hence, all creative works inclusive of music, dance, sculpture, painting, poetry, architecture, engineering, and mechanics are considered as *silpa*. Lately, the word “*silpa*” has also been much referred to as the art of sculptural forms (Boner et al, 1982:2).
Hence, the idea of design in the Indian dance performances is not conceived as in the same vein as the art of *Lokadharmi*. It is presented as symbolic as in the art of *Natyadharmi*.\textsuperscript{12} The designs in this manner are not created to resemble a realistic form or ambience as would in the case of Western concept of stage design.\textsuperscript{13} Every element of design is executed to continuously engage with the Indian philosophical ideas and their traditional art forms that aspire for inner experiences, the state of *rasa*, which I would equate with enhanced experience.

**Part Two**

**Literature Review**

In order to understand the various aspects of Indian dance theatre, I undertook a literature review that would assist me to uncover the various symbolic and aesthetic expressions that are presented in theatre. From the time of the *Natyaasastra*, however, the various components of Indian theatre also consist of all other features of Indian fine arts, namely, sculpture, architecture, painting, literature, music and dance. For many centuries, this has been the practice of Indian dance theatre.

From the literature review, I wish to find out how various symbolic forms and spaces were conceived and how these have been address by different scholars. My intention here is to search for the interconnectedness of Indian art. Through these findings, I hope to uncover the essence of Indian art.

\textsuperscript{12} In the *Natyaasastra*, Bharata states that *Natyadharmi* is the art of presenting theatrical productions in an unrealistic manner. This consists of the use of gesture, expression, sound, setting, props, etc in a symbolic way. On the other hand, *Lokadharmi*, is the act of creating performances in a realistic or naturalistic manner. The play or performance is conveyed through worldly behaviour, without any stylization, poetic imagination and symbolic structure (in Gupt, Bharat, 1994: 236-247).

\textsuperscript{13} Most productions in western theatre, specially ballets and operas produce lavish and realistic stage design to present the intended ambience or scenery to depict the story or theme.
In the art of theatre, there are many ways that a performance can be presented to create an experience. In fact, theatre is a means of creating an experience in the audience. However, theatre also creates an experience for the performer. Therefore, theatre as Gay McAuley, Manmohan Ghosh, M. L Varadpande, and other scholars have argued, is where the audience and the performer come into contact and another world is created.

Theatre, therefore, is considered as a space where performance experiences are created. It is a space in which the performance is carried forth to the audience, and, through that process, they are not only transported to another world, but are also made to engage with the performance. Through the various theatrical techniques, performance are designed and developed to enable the performer and audience to experience something beyond the everyday life. Ultimately, theatre is where various “creative visions” through artistic representation and approach are produced to evoke an experience in the audience.

This other world for the audience and the performer can be an experience of entertainment, of social issues, religion or spirituality. Since ancient times, theatre has been a form of religious activity where people, through various means, portrayed the themes of the Gods and celestial beings (Varadpande, 1983). Most stories were based upon the premises of myths and legends.

In order to create an experience that absorbs the viewer into the other world, various methods were used. To Indian philosophers, theatre was considered the creation of the Gods, so that humans could, for a moment of their lives, forget all their earthly activities and immerse themselves into another world (Ghosh, 1961; Rangacharya, 2003; Gargi, 1962).
In the origins of Indian theatre, the *Natyasastra* discusses how theatre was formed. Indian mythology holds that once, when the world was in total freedom and unmanageable, there was chaos everywhere (Gargi, 1962; Dhananjayan, 2004). The world was filled with anger, jealousy, hatred and uncontrolled sensual pleasure. On seeing these conditions in the world, Lord Indra approached Lord Brahma (known as the creator of the universe) to divert the people’s attention away from all these happenings. Brahma said to Indra that, in order to divert people away from the chaos, there is a need for something that is audible and visual (Gargi, 1962: 5). With deep contemplation, Brahma took the essence from the four Vedas (the four essential ancient schools of thought – *Rig Veda, Ajur Veda, Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*) and created the fifth Veda known as *Natyaveda* (ibid).

Though the *Natyaveda* seems to be the creation of Lord Brahma, scholars have attributed the ancient Indian theatre form to sage Bharata (Ghosh, 1961; Rangacharya, 2003; Vatsyayan, 1996). This ancient Indian theatre Veda was later considered to be compiled by the sage. Since it was meant for man to understand, learn and execute the arts in a systematic way, Bharata innovatively categorised the various methodologies into different sections. This treatise of the theatre came to be known as the *Natyasastra* (the school of dramatic arts) (ibid).

The *Natyasastra* has been researched and practiced by many Indian and Western theatre scholars and practitioners. Scholars, such as Manmohan Ghosh, Adya Rangacharya, Balwant Gargi, M. Krzysztof Byrski and others have all thoroughly described in detail the content of *Natyasastra*. However, the content of *Natyasastra* described by them can be summed up as,

In *Natyasastra*, Bharata Muni consolidated and codified various traditions in dance, mime and drama. This comprehensive treatise gives all conceivable
details of make-up and costumes, has exhaustive notes on direction and production, deals with the theory of aesthetics and analyzes various sentiments and their portrayal. Difficult body postures, movements of the neck, the breast and the eyeballs, and styles of gait, colour, jewellery, etc., are elaborately described. No book of ancient times in the world contains such an exhaustive study on dramaturgy as Natyasastra.

(Gargi, 1962: 5)

Even today, the Natyasastra still holds as the key text for Indian dance theatre and in some cases, for the Western theatre practitioners too. Scholars and theatre practitioners, such as Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba discuss several methods presented in the Natyasastra that can be used in Western theatre practice to enhance performance experiences (Schechner, 2001; Barba et al, 1991).

In his writings, on the aspects of Natyasastra aesthetics, Richard Schechner explains an adaptability of rasa and how he uses the essence of the nine different emotions presented in the Natyasastra. Through understanding the various basic emotions, he then created a technique for Western theatre practitioners called as Rasaesthetics (Schechner, 2001). In this technique, he drew nine boxes on the floor to represent the nine different emotions. In that way he trained the Western actors to experience the box space and to experience the various emotions within the boxes (Schechner, 2001: 27-50).

On the other hand, Eugenio Barba used the technique of energy described in Indian dance theatre and incorporated this into his theatre practice (Barba and Savarese, 1991). He explored the various movements within Indian dance to understand how different energies are produced, sustained and felt by the performer (ibid). He also studied how these energies are similarly applied in other classical dance forms to generate or produce an experience in the observer’s mind (ibid).
Many such scholars and practitioners of the West and the East have used the techniques mentioned in *Natyasastra* to further develop their theatre practices. It is evident in the writings of scholars and theatre practitioners, like Kapila Vatsyayan, Adyar Rangacharya and V.P. Dhananjayan, that the *Natyasastra* consists of various techniques that can be applied to produce various theatre experiences in the performer and the audience. In fact, Bharata, the author of *Natyasastra* says that “There is no art, no knowledge, no yoga, and no action that is not found in *natya*” (in Rangacharya 2003: 4). The *Natyasastra*, therefore, can be considered as one of the most important Indian dance treatises of all times.

Fundamentally, Bharata has categorised the art of Indian theatre in two ways. The first is through theatre presentation that is *lokadharmi* (regarded as realistic) and the second method is through *natyadharmi* (regarded as suggestive or symbolic) (Ghosh, 1961; Rangacharya, 2003; Gargi, 1962; Vatsyayan, 1996).

In their research writings, all of these scholars contend that the art of *lokadharmi* was intended to present the performance in a natural and realistic manner. This includes the natural stage setting and the natural acting. Everything that is presented is conceived in the concept of naturalism (ibid).

On the other hand, the stage presentations through the art of *natyadharmi* consist of various modes of expressions that are conceptualised as suggestive. These include: costumes, the make-up, the acting and dancing, and the stage setting (ibid). Further, the *Natyasastra* also discusses how stage space is divided into various segments and is used to suggest symbolic spaces (ibid). Every theatrical method used or applied in the *natyadharmi* approach is symbolically executed.
However, according to scholars of Indian theatre, the idea of the suggestive or the symbolic as mentioned in the *Natyasastra* goes beyond the confines of stage space. Both Manmohan Ghosh and Rangacharya say that symbolism is also applied to the building of the whole theatre space. In the *Natyasastra*, sage Bharata explained how the architecture of the performance space and artistic forms within the theatre should look like. He also specified the spatial concepts that lie within the physical construction of the theatre (Rangacharya, 2003: 7 – 21).

The creation of the architectural auditorium space, the physical forms, the stage space and the execution of performance, according to scholar Rangacharya, are all designed to absorb the audience into another world (ibid). In his writings, he says that the whole auditorium space aimed to create a space that is ordained to the divine. For Bharata, this created space, was designed to enhance audience experiences (ibid).

To Indian theatre scholars, the ideology of *Natyadharma* is not only for audience experiences, but the art is also for the performer to dance, act and experience the performance in a suggestive manner (ibid). Many scholars have discussed this technique of presentation by the dancer, where every expression and gesture is significantly demonstrated in the *Natyasastra* (ibid, Vatsyayan, 1977). According to these scholars, the technique of “suggestivity” used in Indian dance theatre creates an overwhelming experience for the performer and the audience (ibid). These ideas have also been explored by theatre practitioners and critics such as Dhananjayan, Sunil Kothari, Uday Shankar, Chandralekha, who argue that symbolic ideas presented in theatre are among the most interesting and overpowering experiences within Indian theatre.
In India, the expression of an art form as suggestive or symbolic was not only confined to dance and drama. Indian art, in general, argues Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, is perceived as a language of symbolic expression that creates an array of multitude meanings (Coomaraswamy, 1956). Such an application of art is what also makes Indian theatre appealing and challenging. Scholar Kapila Vatsyayan holds that the inspiration of India dance theatre is meant to express and to communicate ideas that not only reveal the inner meanings, but also create aesthetic experiences that will engage the audience (Vatsyayan, 1977).

Given such a high regard and conceptual importance of symbolism in Indian dance theatre, a brief discussion of the subject is necessitated. It allows us to study how the subject on Indian art and its symbolic forms has been perceived and explored by different scholars.

**Symbolism in Indian art**

Scholars at many different levels have discussed the subject of symbolism in Indian art and its effects on the viewer. These include scholars such as Coomaraswamy, (1976); Vatsyayan, (1997); Mircea Eliade and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (1992); Sivaramamurti, (1974) and Michell, (1977). In the twenty first century, scholars as Sonit Bafna (2000), Adam Hardy (2001), Vittorio Roveda (2002), David Brown (2004), and Jack Tresidder (2006) have also undertaken such study.

In his book, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1956) has brilliantly captured the essence of Indian art, in general. He discussed several interrelationships between Indian arts and compared it with the arts of the Orient. His main point was that any work of art does not present or exist for its own course,
regardless of its form, texture, colour or any combination of all these (Coomaraswamy, 1956). It exists in relation to other forms in space (ibid). Coomaraswamy in his discussion says, for example, that words when transformed as visual form create an uplifting experience (Coomaraswamy, 1997:143). He felt that such work of art should be in symbolic form and should not be presented in a realistic manner. According to him, a work of art that is in realistic form does not portray inner meanings; rather, he felt that it should be regarded as “decadent” (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 128). He says, that art exists because it is perceived as metaphysical and is ingrained with religious values and thus, produces certain experiences in the observer (Coomaraswamy, 1956).

In general, Coomaraswamy says that Indian art is constantly projected and emphasised as symbolic art. It seeks to represent what is not realistic in nature. Therefore, he says Indian art is considered as a symbolic language that is metaphoric and is permeated with meanings to be discovered (Coomaraswamy, 1956, 1997). This is also further discussed by an Indian scholar of modern times, Kapila Vatsyayan. She argues that, everything that is around us has symbolic meanings, and therefore, what is visible is only for us to encounter the invisible which is within (1997:20). She further says that, in India, the arts as creative symbolic form is the basis to the very understanding of what is around us (Vatsyayan, 1997). According to Vatsyayan, art creates an interrelationship between what is presented physically and what is perceived by the mind (ibid). Ultimately, in her discussion what she says is that symbolic forms are conceived as the “vehicles of communicating the core principles of a pervasive and an all-permeating world-view” (Vatsyayan, 1997: xiii). In understanding Indian art in that manner, she says, a total aesthetic experience can only be achieved when Indian art is seen as a whole and not in isolation (ibid).
This discussion is also equally observed in the writings of Mircea Eliade. His way of observing and analysing the art forms of India has in fact opened the eye of the Western mind. In his writing, he challenges the mind of the West to see and seek Indian art not through the lenses / perspective of Western mind, but through how it is experienced by the Indians (Eliade and Apostolos-Cappadona, 1992: 72-80). Eliade says, “India is a country of the metaphysical – of the purest and most abstract effort to attain love, understanding, and harmony with life – precisely for the reasons it has created an art that is original, vital, and pure” (ibid: 72). This conceptual essence of Indian art seems to be blurred to some scholars, especially in the Western world. This Western perspective is discussed in the journal-article, “Some Aspects of Indian Art” in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* (1909). According to the article, even though the art of India seems to be interesting, it was by no means taken as something which can be considered as critical or significant (ibid: 353). Indian art according to the writer, did not present itself as something that will interest the Western scholars and be positioned at the same or higher level to other arts of the world (ibid).

However, Eliade discusses these issues of Indian art forms in a very different perspective. In one of his chapter writings, *Reflection on Indian Art*, he clarifies how Indian art and its creator should be observed beyond the art’s physical presentation or form. His viewpoint is that,

> Indian art never made compromises with the flat beauty of picture post cards—because it had [in the] back of it metaphysics. The Indian artist never tried to copy nature because, being a philosopher (in the Indian sense of the word: a pure and harmonious man), he could be nature, and thus he could create in parallel with nature, imitating only the organic impulse, the thirst for life and growth, the caprice of discovering new forms and new delights, while not imitating directly the creations of nature, forms already achieved and thus, in a sense, dead. Whereas the European artist imitated the creations of nature and tried to reproduce its forms - passing them through his soul in...
order to give them a new emotional potential—the Indian artist imitated the
gesture of nature and created on his own account, using however a different
space and different forms from natural ones.

(Eliade in Eliade and Apostolos-Cappadona 1992: 73)

Symbolism as in form and space has thoroughly been discussed by Indian and
Western scholars. They include Zimmer and Joseph Campbell (1960), Stella
Kramrisch (1965), George Michell (1977), Vittorio Roveda (2002),
Champakalakshmi and Usha (2001), Iravati (2003), Richard Lannoy (1971) and other
scholars as well. In their research writings, they discuss how different symbolic forms
in space are created to produce experiences to the viewer and the participator (ibid).

Michell and Kramrisch examined how the temple as a form in space is related to the
Indian ideas of the body perceived as a mandala, the Hindu fundamental concept of
architecture plan (Michell, 1977: 71-72; Kramrisch, 1965: 15-21). Their discussion
on the design of the temple structures clearly elucidates the notion that the Indian
conceive the temple in their mind. Further, the whole concept of the Indian temple
according to them is also based on the idea of the mountain (ibid). This mountain
concept is also discussed in the Hindu myths and religion, where it is presented as
having a sacred form, constituting a sacred space, where the Gods reside (Shattuck,
1999). Popular names of mountains that are observed and related to the ideas of
Hinduism and sacred space are the Mount Kailash and Mount Meru (ibid: 68).

In her book, Hinduism, Cybelle Shattuck, a devoted believer of religious experiences
and a scholar in Hinduism and Judaism, debated on the concept of the temple as a
form and as space to be experienced by human. She wrote that temples were formed
as pathways to reach the “divine realm” (ibid). Her writings reveal, that the art of
creating such monuments in earthly space was conceived as an art form that was
connected to the divine (ibid: 62-70). Further, she claims that humans created such forms in space so that they could experience these ideas in reality, which they themselves have created (ibid). All this, according to her discussion, were closely related to the concepts of the Vedas and Hindu traditions (ibid).

These concepts are also studied in more detail by Michell, Kramrisch and Roveda. Their research on Hindu temples extended to include the ideas of temple space, as the main hub of creative and spiritual activity (Michell, 1977; Kramrisch, 1965). The temples, according to them were adorned with numerous sculptures, paintings, bas-reliefs that created the effect of connecting man to the unknown world (ibid). Moreover, in their writings, it is also evident that these visuals, which are presented as “freeze frames” were able to capture the viewer’s mind (ibid). The idea of creating such sculptural symbolic form in temple spaces, as discussed by Jai Pal Singh and Mumtaz Khan also pertain to the idea discussed by Shattuck (1999), Michell (1977) and Kramrisch (1965). Singh and Khan also state that the symbolic form in space propelled humans to the idea of contemplating on the created form as divine interconnections.

In their study, they found that the temple sculptures were created as “vehicle[s] for spiritual attainment” (Singh and Khan, 2002: 74). Their concept of the temple as a sacred space lies in its power to constantly engage with the forms in space that project the idea of the sacred. The purpose here was to focus on forms and space as a “spiritual vehicle” (ibid). These concepts were evident throughout their writing; substantially referencing the ideology embedded in Hindu mythological and legendary spaces (Singh and Khan, 2002).
Several other scholars have written about sacred spaces and spaces that create an experience. In her book, *Performing Artistes in Ancient Theatre*, Iravati dealt with the idea of ancient theatre space that was created in ancient times (Iravati 2003). In her writings, she discusses how cave spaces, open-air spaces and pavilions (*mandapa*) were shaped to exist as theatre space. She says that spaces as theatres in ancient time were designed to project sacredness (ibid: 187-204). Spaces such as theatre caves were able to create ethereal sounds and light, through the various echoes and shadows that were produced (ibid). In this space, rituals were performed as part of the performance experience. Furthermore, this space was adorned with sculptures and architectural elements that were conducive to religious and spiritual plays (ibid: 194-196).

This concept is also observed in the writings of Richard Lannoy (1971). In exploring the monumental caves in Maharashtra India (Ajanta Caves), Lannoy suggests that every sculptural and architectural form found in the ancient Indian caves transported the viewer to another realm (Lannoy, 1971). According to Lannoy, Indian artists were constantly engaging with natural sources, such as sun-light, to create an ambience within the caves that will transform the space (ibid, 43). Hence, the participants are made to experience the space rather than simply “seeing” this space (ibid).

Dance scholars have also addressed such spaces and forms created to be experienced by the viewers. In the writings of Phillip Zarrilli (1984) and Kapila Vatsyayan (1991), performance space was transformed as a space that not only engaged the viewers, but the participants as well. Space and form, therefore, are considered the crucial components in Indian dance theatre. Both are perceived as the essence of theatre, and by which aesthetic experiences are generated.
Experiences – Space and Form in Indian dance theatre

Several scholars have raised issues about experiencing space and forms in Indian dance performances. Phillip Zarrilli’s account of performance space takes us to the Indian traditional theatre space. In his research, which is focused solely on the tradition of Kathakali dance theatre, Zarrilli emphasises the notion of form and space in the dance.

In his book, *The Kathakali complex: actor, performance & structure*, he emphasises the importance of integrating every theatrical element to produce what he describes as “total theatre” (Zarrilli, 1984: 212). Zarrilli’s writings are constantly centred upon the traditional art forms that have to be maintained to bring out the best of Kathakali dance performances in their totality.

In his discussion, it is clear that, in order to create a total theatre experience, forms and spaces in theatre need to be considered. He sees elements in theatre as similar to that of the elements in temple space, including adornments of sculptural and architectural artifacts, that needed to be considered (ibid 161-164). The traditional Kathakali theatre, which creates this ambience, was able to transport the audience to another world (ibid). Further, he felt that, not only is the physical ambience important, but also stressed that the use of light source in the space and in the performance is crucial to create the effect of Kathakali (ibid: 152, 159).

Moreover, by creatively using light, sound and other theatre elements, Zarrilli suggests that the performance is able to transform the whole theatre space. Integrating or synthesising various theatrical medium, says Zarrilli, is effectively the purpose of theatre (Zarrilli, 1984). Clearly, in his writings, it is obvious that traditional art forms
when innovatively produced, can heighten the performance experiences (ibid 212-213). He articulates this in relation to the performer and the audience, where both are able to experience something beyond the ordinary. This, according to Zarrilli, can only be achieved through reinstating theatre experiences that echoes the essence of traditional Indian theatre practices (Zarrilli 1984).

In voicing a similar approach, V.P Dhananjayan writes that the contemporary and modern theatre spaces are not able to create the effect of traditional practices (Dhananjayan, 2004). In his discussion, he says that the modern theatre spaces need to be transformed, to recapture the quintessence of Indian art and its practices. His writing suggests that theatrical elements, such as light and sound, are also significantly important to evoke the symbolic idioms that are contained in Indian dance (ibid: 52-57). Through these elements, he proposes that Indian dance can further be extended to reach a higher state of artistic expression (ibid: 58-60).

Indian theatre experiences of both suggestive and symbolic approaches are also significantly written and researched by scholars such as Avanthi Meduri (2004, 2005), Sunil Kothari (1995, 2003), and Ananya Chatterjea (2004). In their edited and written works, they not only discuss dance as symbolic expression, but they also examine how designs as symbolic forms are expressed in dance. In his writings on Rukmini Devi’s dance production, Kothari claims that Devi’s approach to Indian dance theatre was essentially symbolic (Kothari, 2004). In understanding and applying theatrical elements within the dance, Kothari’s discussion suggests that Indian dance can be enhanced if design is treated in a symbolic and aesthetic way (ibid: 80-81). This idea is also further elaborated in his edited books: Rasa: The
Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-five Years (1995); and New Directions in Indian Dance (2003).

In his writings, it is clear that in recent times the Indian dance panorama has gone through various changes. His editorial pages discuss the different methods taken by artists to create new approaches to Indian dance theatre (Kothari, Mukherjee, et al., 1995: 131-136). One important point that he stresses on the part of Indian dance is that “It is also indicative of the desire on part of performers and the audience to see that the dance keeps pace with the changing times, reflecting these changes both in its content and the form” (ibid: 133). He further emphasises that the “innovative and experimental dances” can obviously exist with the classical dance forms (ibid).

Moreover, in Sunil Kothari’s analysis on the development of Indian dance, he proposes that through various techniques or methods, the artist’s ultimate purpose is to evoke the aesthetic experience, *rasa*, in the observer’s mind (ibid: 133-134). Various forms, content and spaces are created in different ways by different artists to express what they think needs to be revealed when juxtaposed with Indian philosophy and ideas (ibid: 132-135).

In order for Indian dance to progress further, Kothari in his writings suggests that, it is in the inter-globalisation approach that Indian dance will be able to create new innovative dance works (ibid 135). However, he stresses that the fundamental success in such creative work, lies in the awareness of the artist towards the traditions of Indian dance theatre. He says,

Even when the practitioners have felt the need to go beyond the mythological themes and express the contemporary issues, the need for understanding the aesthetics of dance through the study of the Natyasastra and the Rasa Theory has never been lost sight of. Those who have ventured to experiment and extend the horizons of the dance are the inheritors of the great traditions
and are aware of its value. They are forging ahead without any disrespect for the tradition. They are capable of articulating what they are seeking to do through dance.

(Kothari, Mukherjee et al., 1995:132-133)

The idea of experimenting with forms and spaces to create new seeing and new experiencing is also evident in Kapila Vatsyayan’s writings on *The Future of Dance Scholarship in India* (1995). In this article, we find that Vatsyayan questions the issues of Indian dance moving forward. She says that contemporary and modern dance choreography, which is art in itself, will be the future trend of Indian dance, but the challenge would be to always question the tradition within these art forms (Vatsyayan, 1995: 485-490). She proposes that the future of Indian dance lies in how it is studied with other arts form of India and proposes that Indian dance ought to be reinvestigated and explored in parallel with all other Indian arts traditions (ibid: 490).

In exploring the richness of Indian dance, Sunil Kothari also put forward similar concerns and supports the notion of creating new works that expressed various forms, content and space. He says that Vatsyan’s emphasis on the “interdependence and interconnectedness” of Indian art is crucial to the growth of Indian dance. In referring to her article, *The Indian Arts, Their Ideational Background and Principles of Form*, Kothari says,

[Kapila Vatsyayan] has rightly laid stress on investigating the interrelationship of Indian arts on the plane of speculative thought, content, form and technique by identifying a few basic concepts and motifs in which they find artistic expression in the different arts, including dance [...] it forms the bedrock of Indian arts taking in its sweep the issues of the form and content, offering fresh insights.

(Kothari, Mukherjee, et al., 1995:133)

Such exploration of arts, according to Vatsyayan, is the true essence of Indian dance traditions. She says that, the synthesis of all others arts within the Indian dance has, in
fact, created “the most beautiful and significant symbol of the spiritual and artistic approach of the Hindu mind” (Vatsyayan, 1977:23). In addition, she says, by understanding the various art forms of sculpture, architecture, painting, literature and music, Indian dance has flourished to create a complex system of techniques (ibid:12). Ultimately, Vatsyayan’s writings argues that it is through the technique that the artist seeks to create works of art that not only enhance the performance experiences, but also create a contemplative approach to the work (ibid: 20-21). By doing so, the symbolised artistic work, therefore, becomes an experience in itself (ibid).

**Conclusion**

The literature review that I have undertaken above assisted me to question the form, the content and the space, which seem to be the underlying factors in the creation of Indian dance experiences. In many of the scholarly writings, I found that there is a basic concept of Indian arts that needs to be explored further – the concept of suggestivity.

Hence, from the literature review, I asked: If Indian dance theatre as mentioned in the *Natyasastra* is the synthesis of all arts, why has it not being explored much by recent artists? What constitutes the basic concepts in Indian art that can be experimented in Indian dance as well? Why were huge and grand temples and bas-reliefs built to glorify Indian dance? Why is symbolic expression important in Indian arts and how can it be integrated into Indian dance?

Finally, after understanding the diverse points from the literature review, I wish to address the various symbolic forms that are found in Indian arts. Through such
investigation, I hope to discover the ‘essence of forms.’ Since the literature review also identifies space as an important element in Indian art, I will endeavour to uncover the implications of the relationship between form and space.

While Indian dance is interdependent and interconnected with all other art forms of India, the thesis wishes to explore and examine the various approaches taken by artists to experiment such interrelationships. As a dancer, in responding to the future of Indian dance addressed by Kapila Vatsyayan and Sunil Kothari, I will also explore the various Indian art forms that will enable me to better understand the inner quintessence of Indian dance theatre.

By experimenting with various techniques, I hope to discover how Indian dance can be further enriched, especially when performances are created in contemporary and modern theatre spaces. The primary question is how can traditional spaces and forms be recaptured and represented in the performance spaces of today? Ultimately, I seek to explore how symbolic expressions of Indian art, integrated within Indian dance theatre, can create an enhanced performance experience in the performer and the audience. Therefore, the purpose is to identify the various means by which Indian dance theatre can be extended, and search for the integrated meanings and beauty that can possibly create new ways of seeing and experiencing performances.
CHAPTER 2: FORM AND FORMLESS

Introduction

The wisdom of Form and Formless:

Heart Sutra:

"Form Is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form"
'rupam eva Sunyata, Sunyata eva rupam'

Katha Upanisad and Brihadarayaka Upanisad:

"Forms, multiple forms and beyond forms"
'rupam rupam pratirupo bavuho'

(Quoted in Vatsyayan, 1991: xvi)

Forms are usually referred to or regarded as consisting a shape or a volume. Indeed, a form needs to be recognised by its physical appearance; it can project a particular shape, a particular colour, texture, and size. However, does form also represents what we cannot see with our naked eye?

In this chapter, I wish to argue that form can also be the purpose for which one wishes to see and to that extent how different elements can or will contribute to “another seeing”. As argued by Pinker, a complete theory of form perception must consider how form information is represented within the visual system of a particular culture.¹

My emphasis here is to justify the implication of reading an innovative form through acknowledging issues of representations in architecture, dance and Indian art, in general. I view this as a relatively new approach to dance that unifies results from many different experiments. I equate these concepts, both as perceptual and psychological (DeValois and DeValois, 1988).

I will also attempt to show how forms in Indian fine arts can be utilised to create another level of experience. This discussion will help clarify to the purist and the extra cautious traditional artist that when design as a form is executed properly within a given context, it can indeed work towards enhancing tradition.

In order to explore these possibilities, the chapter will treat the discussed form as a symbolic icon that also possesses aesthetic qualities. The aim for such treatment is to engage our mind in the meanings, its creativity and not in the physical forms alone. The purpose of this quest, therefore, is to examine how the simultaneous application of design and dance as symbolic and aesthetic forms tend to create another form, another beauty and another meaning. This I suggest encompasses what I call a formless state.²

The study will be based specifically on situations where traditional dance forms are performed outside their traditional spaces. The chapter, therefore, focuses on the issues of form and formless of performances that are performed in modern / contemporary venues and theatres.

In order to address these issues, the chapter will be divided into four sections. In the first part, the argument will be based on the fundamentals of “form as representation” in India art. This is to discuss how specific forms are perceived as ‘formless’ and how this contributes to the viewer’s experiences. The second section will concentrate on how the temple was conceived as a symbolic form and how this form can be extended in the performance space. The idea here is to recreate the “essence” that is found in

² The created form in Indian art is commonly regarded as beyond all forms, which is equated to the Supreme reality - the formless. However, to experience the formless state the form need to be formally manifested or expressed and this state according to Eck, D.L is the divine state (Eck, 1998).
the temple form. The third section on dance, design and form / formless will focus on how design can be made an integral part of Indian dance, and how this affects the meanings and experiences of a performance. Finally, the forth section, will discuss the form of Lord Nataraja that is considered as the most important visual icon in Indian dance and the arts. I examine how it was conceived and how I now see it as an important theatrical concept in this modern era.

The purpose of these sections therefore is to address how forms in Indian art are conceived as formless and to study how these concepts can then be applied in performance. Further, by introducing design elements in performance, I intend to argue that the integration of design and dance creates another form that eventually links to the meaning of formless as perceived in Indian art.

Form as Representation

In the arena of creative arts, “form” in general, has been a matter of identifying the artwork in its physical sense. Form in that manner is recognised either through its colour, texture, shape, medium or function. However, the form that I would like to address here does not emphasise much on the physical appearance, but rather the “representational” or what I would term as the “symbolic.”

The expression, “symbolic”, has always been part of a cultural, religious, traditional expression. Its significance to humankind has made it a common medium to

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3 The ‘essence’ in Indian art can be associated to the argument of Mircea Eliade. He argues that symbolic forms conceal meanings, which when understood are considered images of “flight”. He refers this to that capacity of the symbol to translate the “secret things.” He further states that when one contemplates on “flight” and the parallels of parts to the total symbol, their meanings are revealed instantly (Refer to p.4, Symbolism, the Sacred & the Arts)
communicate and understand meanings. In my view, symbols can also be considered as precise or designed forms that contain layers of meanings. Their significance lies in what I consider as the “formless state.” Understanding these qualities allows symbols to be created as an expression of peoples’ connection with life. In encountering with this symbolic expression in the Vedas, Kapila Vatsyayan says,

The specificity of life is abstracted into a design which is capable of multiple meaning. A point, a line, a vertical, a spiral, a triangle, a circle and finally a square become symbols with plurality of meaning: indeed, anything that is visible can contain layers of meaning, and also has validity for itself. The language of metaphysics becomes the language of symbols, signs and formal design. The ultimate objective is never forgotten and therefore the visible is not just visible but is the very aid to the invisible.

(Vatsyayan, 1997:20)

In order to understand these assumptions, the section will, first, define the science of form and explain how forms are perceived in the mind. Following from this understanding, the section will explore those properties that lie within the symbolic form; namely the ability to produce the qualities of “transformation”, “stimulation” and “integration” in the context of Indian art forms. The symbol of the lotus will be used as an example to emphasise the connotations and correlations, assess the properties within this symbolic form and its integration with other forms.

However, I must reemphasise that the study of design concepts in Indian dance performances are explored in a symbolic approach that also imply aesthetic beauty. In my opinion, design treated in this manner, foregrounds the tradition of Indian dance where dance itself is treated as a symbolic gesture. Treating design and dance as symbolic form, creates an equal or balanced platform for integration. In doing so,

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4 The Symbolic in the thesis is not only confined to the representational meanings, but it is also conceived as an artistically produced form to initiate aesthetic experiences in the creator’s mind and the observers.
the symbol is never seen as an isolated identity; rather it permits an enhanced and harmonised meaning to performances. This results in enriched performance experiences.

**Defining Symbolic Forms**

In the Indian theory of the Science of Forms (*Sadanga*), it is mentioned that art created as a form does not present itself as it appears to the physical eye, but as a revelation known and corresponding to an intellectual aesthetic model. ⁵ Intrinsic to the outer form of imagery is a perceived relationship to the symbolic. Indeed, it is argued that images are mere symbols of “contemplation” that represent the "supreme” in its “highest form” (Radhakrishnan, 1940: 317).

When something is produced or constructed, it is at that moment being given a form. What needs to be acknowledged here is that this form is generated from an initial process of visualization in the mind. To that extent, the form is already completed by envisioning it in the mind. As Coomaraswamy says, 'the idea of “art” has already been completed even before the work of representing it has commenced’ (Coomaraswamy, 1976: 28). However, this understanding of form and formless according to Jitendranath Mohanty is viewed differently by many others. He argues that what is perceived in the conscious mind can be described as formless from one view, but from another observation, as in the case of Buddhism, the conscious image is considered as form (Mohanty, 1992: 34).

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However, in my view, the idea of the “form or formless perception” in the mind, generates an ideal object. Through such a process, we are then able to materialise a particular object by using various mediums in space. Nonetheless, the developed object in space does not immediately represent everything to the viewer, except to the creator. Therefore, form in space needs to be read from the understanding of its representation as a visual concept.

Accordingly, as a visual perception, form is the culmination of a series of visualization process, as most of which transpire at a pre-conscious mind state. As such, it is argued that simply looking at an object tells you very little about the intermediate steps involved in deriving one’s impression of that object's form.\(^6\)

In the case of Indian art, there are many essential forms that are represented by many different visual kinds and presented through various mediums. Indeed, traditional Indian art rich in its philosophy is projected through the art of architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, dance and music. Each of these art forms produces its own richness and concepts. However, all these forms contribute to the philosophy that sees art as contextualised within or represented in connection with the divine. In fact, art forms of India are very much related and linked to spirituality.

Consequently, we note that divine images were created to allow believers to meditate upon them. In fact, the *Vishnu Samhita*, an ancient Hindu ritual text, persuasively endorses the use of imagery:

> Without a form, how can God be meditated upon?
> Where will the mind fix itself?
> When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into

\(^6\) Refer to *Perception* by Sekuler and Blake, 1990: 117-118
Indeed, representational forms in Indian ancient art were created as a sacred form. These symbolic forms can thus be said to be those that represented human understanding of the divine power through which he/she was able to connect and engage in them. Such divine attribution, I argue, governs the aspects of formless in Indian art. Coomaraswamy expresses such representational work as,

**An ideal derivation of the types that are to be represented or made by the human artist is sometimes asserted in another way, all the arts being thought of as having a divine origin, and as having been revealed or otherwise brought down from Heaven to Earth.**

(Coomaraswamy, 1956: 8)

In my opinion, the creation of artistic works based on their divine origin can be considered as an aesthetic beauty. The aesthetic thus affects the perceiver’s experiences. This creative quality is what I would refer to as formal magnificence, through which one experiences the “formless state” that is “revealed” within a work of art. According to Ananda Coomaraswamy, the revelation in a work of art that is enjoyed by the perceiver is able to produce the “aesthetic experience” (ibid: 49). He further elaborates that this aesthetic experience in his view creates a “transformation” not that of a sensation alone, but of an inner comprehension that relates the work of art towards the divine (ibid).

Works of art that produce a particular form can, therefore, be regarded as forms that stimulate an aesthetic experience. However, such an idea of form when compared and equated to Coomaraswamy’s argument necessitates transformation (ibid: 49). In my view, these conceptual thoughts can be generally found in the symbolic forms of...
Indian art, where an understanding of its implications transforms and enhances the viewer’s experiences.

Hence, in Indian art, the most important element that binds the art is its ability to contain layers of meanings within a specific form. Symbolic forms are therefore, created to unravel the inner dimensions as metaphor of a formless state within the particular representational art. Many of such symbols created in Indian art are closely associated with the Vedic scriptures.

Symbolic concepts that are referred to in the scriptures are also found in all other major world religions. Emerging from these findings, we often discover that in many religions words were identified as the core form of divine power (Graham, 1987). Indeed, the scriptures in the Bible, the Koran and the Hindu Vedas are all considered as ‘engraved’ with divine words (ibid), and as such are given specific forms.

However, Ananda Coomaraswamy argues that “we [need] to see this Word, not now in audible but in a visible and tangible form” (Coomaraswamy, 1997: 143). He proposed that when forms are observed with such attributions, they resonate to present the qualities of the form as a “whole” (ibid). It can be argued that in order to experience a form, visible or physical forms have to be created to present symbolically the holistic characteristics of a particular form. Such tangible and visible form is what I would assert as the enhanced form, within which holds the visible “Word”. This then surfaces as divine form.

Indeed, symbols in Indian art are meant to reinstate the divine and spiritual characteristics. Through such symbols, says Coomaraswamy,
...the iconography can no longer be thought of as a groundless product of conventional realization or idealization, but becomes ascertainment; the form is not of human invention, but revealed and “seen” in the same sense that the Vedic incantations are thought of as having been revealed and “heard”.

(Coomaraswamy, 1997: 159)

These revealing properties of symbolic forms, I would argue, represent the notion of formlessness. The ability of the created symbol to hold the “seen” and the “heard”, projects the symbol beyond its own form. As such, the understanding of these revelations through symbolic representations proposes not only visible and tangible icons, but also icons that provoke experiences in the beholder. Forms are no longer seen as objects, but as symbols that visually project meanings. The inner meanings of symbolic forms are said to contain the “mystic powers of icon” and, thus, the invisible is revered through the visible (Kamala Vasini, 1992: 2).

As a result, in Indian art, the outer appearance of a form is not the main criteria of an innovative art; rather the significance of the form is more appreciated / valued. The observer who recognises the inner multi-layered implications of a symbolic form thus experiences the aesthetic beauty beyond the created form.

For an example, Indian representational art such as the lotus is noted for its beauty and much treasured as a symbolic icon. Its function and meaning can differ when presented individually and when integrated with other forms. In a singular manner, the lotus for example is symbolised as a “cosmic lotus” (Zimmer and Campbell, 1946: 90). It is said that,

When the divine life substance is about to put forth the universe, the cosmic waters grow a thousand-petaled lotus of pure gold, radiant as the sun. This is the door or gate, the opening or mouth, of the womb of the universe. It is the first product of the creative principle, gold in token of its incorruptible nature. It
opens to give birth first to the demiurge-creator, Brahma. From its pericarp then issue the host of the created world.

(ibid)

In addition, the lotus emblem is elaborated to emphasise its meaning that projects not only as a symbol of creative power, but also extends to include significances that relate closely to the material world. Therefore,

According to the Hindu conception the waters are female; they are the maternal, procreative aspect of the Absolute, and the cosmic lotus is their generative organ. The cosmic lotus is called “The highest form or aspects of Earth,” also “The Goddess Moisture,” “The Goddess Earth.” It is personified as the Mother Goddess through whom the Absolute moves into creation.

(ibid)

The significance of the symbol of the lotus as expressed by Hindus is also mentioned in other ancient myths and religious beliefs. According to Egyptian mythology, the lotus signifies the ever brilliance of the sun and is associated with the presence of life (Ward, 1952: 135). Further, the lotus is conceptualised as that which indicates “immortality and resurrection” (ibid). In the same note, the emblem lotus is also found in many Buddhist paintings and sculptures and is signified as an icon of “illumination” (ibid).

Hence, we see how the individual concept of the lotus is glorified in the context of its universal appeal that is not only embedded in Hindu philosophy, but also in other ancient convictions. However, as mentioned earlier, when encompassed with other forms, the symbolic form of the lotus produces added meanings and enhances the overall concept. For example, Coomaraswamy says,

…if the Buddha is invariably represented iconographically as supported by a lotus, his feet never touching any physical or local earth, it is because it is the idiosyncrasy of the lotus flower or leaf to be at rest upon the waters; the flower or leaf is universally, and not in any local sense, a ground on which the
Buddha’s feet are firmly planted. In other words, all cosmic, and not merely some or all terrestrial, possibilities are his command. The ultimate support of the lotus can also be represented as a stem identical with the axis of the universe, rooted in a universal depth and inflorescent at all levels of reference…

(Coomaraswamy, 1997: 167)

Therefore, it can be argued that while the symbol lotus in its individual form signifies some profound meaning, the integration of the symbol with other forms intensifies its potential implications. Moreover, the lotus introduced in the iconography of Buddha for example, also enriches the symbolic meanings that are revealed in the teachings of Buddha. Its physical presence not only enhances the iconography, but also places Buddha on a higher pedestal that I consider as the state of “consciousness.”

However, Coomaraswamy argues that the attributions towards the image of Buddha will be reduced when not integrated with the form of lotus and not understood in a deeper level. He says,

If we take the mythical symbol [lotus] literally…the picture is reduced to absurdity, and we expect the “man” [Buddha] to fall into the “water” at any moment. The correspondence of the aesthetic surfaces to the picture not in the colors has been destroyed; the picture is no longer beautiful, however skilfully executed, precisely because it has been robbed of meaning.

(ibid: 168)

In order to visually present Buddha as an embodiment of the divine, rather than an earthly being, the presentation of the lotus symbol was crucial. In my view, the icon of Buddha integrated with the lotus image enables the observer to contemplate on the form at a deeper level, thus, enhancing his / her visual perception and understanding of Buddha in a holistic manner.

In a similar approach, the design elements that are perceived in the Indian dance performances, I argue, are set to implicate a symbolic form when incorporated in a
production. These symbolic designs are not conceptualised the way one would normally do in a literal sense. Instead, the intention behind the use of symbolic designs in performance is to further enhance the performance in such a way as to evoke another experience in the beholder’s mind.

Design therefore, enables the viewer to see the performance in conjunction with the intentions of the dance and the dancer. The body of the dancer and the design elements are integrated in order to produce a conceptual “wholesomeness” (Coomaraswamy, 1997: 135). In doing so, the designs executed precisely, do not destroy the dance, but, rather, as referred to Coomaraswamy’s writings they create “transformation” of the arts towards an “aesthetic experience” (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 49). As such, the integration of the dance with design to enhance the “whole” as an embodiment of icon can be similarly compared to the example discussed in the iconography of Buddha.

These qualities of Indian representational art are not only visible in the field of paintings, sculpture and folk-art, they are also greatly admired and practiced in Indian architecture. Hence, a further study of Indian art symbolism and its relationship within the context of Indian architecture, I believe, will further allow us to understand and expand our thoughts on the concepts of form and formless. For many centuries, ideas of Indian architecture have incorporated sculptural forms and space that relate to the Indian concept of “cosmic space”, as conceived through the ideology of mandala. These concepts are also closely related to dance. Hence, their interrelation plays an important part in studying how forms and spaces can create an enhanced experience for the observer and the participant.
Form in Indian Temple Architecture

The previous section emphasised on the general concepts and certain specific ideas of Indian representational art. To further expand on the representational concepts, the aim of this section is to focus on how the temple as form is conceived not as a physical identity, but more importantly, as a symbolic form.

The structure of the temple as symbolic form is emphasised here to demonstrate how form in Indian art, in general, seeks to attain a higher purpose. The study of temple forms that are created will assist us to understand their meanings, thereby, leading us to identify with their functions.

In order to recognise the significance of these symbolic concepts, the section will begin with the investigation of the basic fundamental shapes that ground Indian architecture. This will show how forms or shapes influence human perceptions and immediate connections to the concept of the universe. The section then will examine the different models of temples; one that was constructed in ancient times and the other that was built in modern times. The purpose here is to explore the various modes of ideas used to create ancient and modern symbolic models. Through such study, I aim to emphasise the function of the architectural form towards spirituality (different material or medium of expression, but for the same purpose).

Hence, the study aims to determine how design forms treated as symbolic forms in performance space affect our perception and how that continues to influence our experiences. Similarly, in exploring how people engage with architecture, the study is intended to show how design forms can be integrated in dance to allow the viewer to engage with the dance and design in a holistic manner. This aims to emphasise how
different mediums in dance can permit to project the essence of tradition. It is not the medium, rather the meanings behind the medium, which are considered crucial to this concept.

**Symbolic Concepts in Indian architecture**

In ancient times, Indian temple architecture was built to highlight not only its inner meanings, but also its overall appearance. The exterior appearances were also designed to present architecture as meaningful forms in space. Many of these forms were clearly intended as symbolic forms. These symbolic forms are more obvious when seen from bird’s eye view (distance affects how we experience the form). Within this completely symbolic architectural form, various other forms are also included.

However, in relation to the temple as a symbolic form, the basic form of an Indian temple is conceptualised either in the form of a square (which is commonly practiced) or in the form of a circle (Champakalakshmi, 2001). These two forms are said to be the symbolic representation of the “world of gods, and the “world of man” (ibid: 13) respectively. In addition, it is also conceptualised that the square symbolises the “spiritual” and the circle signifies the concept of “temporal power” (ibid). These ascriptions on the temple form indicate that such symbolic forms were created or invented for man to transcend the material to spiritual worlds. In my view, the square and the circle, the spiritual and the temporal, are pathways that provokes man to seek an experience of the divine as formless state.
This representation of forms in Indian art, says Vatsyayan, was used in traditional Indian architecture and has contributed to the development of many other forms (Vatsyayan, 1997). Hence, it can be said that the basic fundamental shape found in Indian architecture, follows the concept of square and the circle. However, these symbolic forms also comprise other meanings as well. According to Baidyanath Saraswati, the symbol of square and circle, to the Indian mind symbolises the Earth and the Sky, respectively. She says,

In the Vedic tradition, Sky is the ultimate because all things have arisen out of Sky and they all disappear back into Sky. The Earth is also eulogized as the dwelling from which life springs and to which it returns. This concern of giving equal importance to the Earth and Sky suggest that square and the circle are the basic geometrical forms.

(Saraswati, 2004: 36)

These conceptual forms suggest that there was always a need for humans to engage with the surrounding by creating symbols that portray meanings and enable them to relate to their own experiences. This I argue is the means by which symbols become spiritual elements. Through this, one is able to “transcend [the physical] and achieve oneness with spiritual dimension” (Tresidder, 2006:8). This interconnectedness argues Jack Tresidder, was considered as “a unifying divine wholeness” (ibid) within a “dualistic universe” that is set up as a “spiritual equilibrium” (ibid: 26).

The interconnectedness and the engagements between symbols and human experiences, I would consider was the main purpose for humans to create magnificent architectural monuments. The aim was to continuously seek for that “spiritual balance.” In that manner, one such architectural symbolic testament that can be regarded to absorb the mind is the splendorous design of the Angkor Wat temple situated in Cambodia. This temple was built during the reign of Indian rulers and
therefore equally emphasises the concepts of Indian art (it is not important where this temple exist, but it is the idea behind the architecture, which is significant to this study). The study of such ancient architecture further enhances our perception of design forms that exhibit the notion of formless. I will also equate these notions to the modern architectural form of the marvellous Lotus Temple in New Delhi, India.

The Architectural Symbolism of Angkor Wat

One of the most ancient architectural creations that is not only a temple but also symbolised as a sacred city, is the extraordinary design of the Angkor Wat. This astonishing architecture was created during the reign of King Suryavarman II in the early 12th century. In this section, I will discuss how the temple was formulated as a symbolic form to project the formless. I will also examine the formation of the temple and how it was designed to integrate other forms. Thus, I argue that the ancient temple was designed as a symbolic structure for man to be in communion with the divine world. The symbolic expressions are to be considered as directing perception to a formless state.

The architecture was created as a symbol to glorify the divine. Hence, the name Angkor Wat was derived from two words. The term Angkor originated from the Sanskrit word Nagara, meaning “holy city” and was adapted by the Cambodian as Nokor and later to Angkor. The word Wat was initiated from the Sanskrit term Vatika, which means temple. As such, the architectural design was formulated to develop the city as a sacred form.

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7 Ooi, Keat Gin. *Southeast Asia : A Historical Encyclopedia from Angkor Wat to East Timor*. Vol. 1, 2004
The architecture of Angkor Wat was constructed in accordance to the Indian temple plan. In this architecture, a mathematical system was introduced to symbolically create a temple form that functioned in harmony with the universe. Thus, the temple was conceived in the form of the sacred Himalayan Mountain, known as Mount Meru. The symbolic interrelationship between the design of the Angkor Wat temple and the Mount Meru is described as follows:

This mountain was located north of the Himalayas, surrounded by the four water extensions (seas or rivers) which separate the four continents. Mount Meru floats over the primordial ocean, symbolically represented by moats or the barays surrounding the temple... Since this mountain had four peaks with a higher fifth at the centre, the central sanctuary of Angkor Wat had to have a similar configuration.

(Roveda and Poncar, 2002: 20)

This suggests that the structure of the Angkor Wat temple was designed to envelope the representation of Mount Meru. It also indicates that the creation of this great monument was to equate the concepts of the temple form to that of the “sacred” Mount Meru.

According to Indian doctrine, Mount Meru is considered the “cosmic mountain” around which the planets, sun, and moon orbit (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 2). At the peak of this Mount is situated the “city of the gods” (ibid). Since Mount Meru is considered the centre of the universe, Vittorio Roveda contends that the Angkor Wat was also designed to project the temple as the centre of the universe (Roveda and Poncar, 2002: 20).

This centre in Indian architectural concepts says Roveda, represents the temple as the immeasurable summit “through which the cosmic axis passes” (ibid). Further, he notes that such representation of the Angkor Wat was not meant as a secular form, but
a form in space that is “charged with sacred meaning” (ibid). Such attribution I argue emphasises the notion of design elements that speak not of its external appearance, but how this appearance projects meanings. The intended significance of the Angkor Wat temple designed to inculcate the “formless” can be considered as that which is ordained as the “divine structure.”

In order to visibly present the Angkor Wat temple as a “divine structure”, it was designed as a monument with precise measurements that are encoded with the Indian concepts of cosmology, numerology and astronomy. The Angkor Wat is presented thus:

…virtually every part of the complex has religious significance. Starting from the outside: The moat represents the outer ocean of Hindu mythology; the walls, the mountains; the balustrade lining the boulevard leading to the temple represents cosmic serpent…Finally the central tower…as the home of the gods…the innermost shrine: a large pinecone-shaped tower, surrounded by four smaller towers.

(Petras, 1996: 291)

Therefore, I argue that the architectural form of Angkor Wat was constructed as a symbol to glorify the heavenly celestials. It was designed to signify the concepts of
Hindu myths and legends. In that manner, the visual representations that were created within the temple enabled people to reconnect to its meanings that were also laid down in Indian philosophy.

The description of the Angkor Wat temple by Kathryn Petras (1996: 291) denotes how symbolic forms are presented in such a way to engage the mind. It is a journey from the external world to the inner world. The ultimate purpose is to reach the summit, where the Gods reside. Therefore, I argue that the temple structure was designed as a perspective view to create a sense of “revelation” in the viewer’s mind.\(^8\)

The revealing of the forms in Angkor Wat space was further enhanced by integrating the natural light source radiating from the sun. In doing so, the symbolic forms within Angkor Wat were invigorated, as the forms were transformed by the sunlight illumination. This “revealing”, I argue, emphasises the concept of formless, where the sun is seen as the medium that unravels the “secret things.”\(^9\) Roveda expresses this in his observation of how the bas-reliefs in the architecture of the Angkor Wat were revealed. He says,

\[\ldots\text{as the sun progresses on its annual round, it illuminates in a specific way the great continuous series of reliefs of the 3rd gallery, revealing a most intriguing relationship between the passage of the sun and the content of the reliefs. In the first part of the year, it illuminates the main protagonist of the creation act ('Churning of the Ocean of Milk'). During the autumn equinox, on the side of the setting sun, the highlighted reliefs depict the terrible battle of Kurukshetra. During the dry season, the north gallery loses the sun, while the reliefs on the south gallery, lit up by the sun, take as their theme the kingdom of death.}\]

(Roveda and Poncar, 2002: 19)

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\(^8\) Refer to the book on *Southeast Asia: a historical encyclopaedia form Angkor Wat to East Timor*, edited by Ooi, 2004: 150

\(^9\) Mircea Eliade argues that symbolic forms conceal meanings, which when understood are considered images of “flight”. He refers this to that capacity of the symbol to translate the “secret things.” He further states that when one contemplates on “flight” and the parallels of parts to the total symbol, their meanings are revealed instantly (Refer to p.4, *Symbolism, the Sacred & the Arts*)
This process of revealing, in my opinion, can also be said to show how performance space that is designed as a symbolic form can affect the viewing experience from the audience’s perspective. Like the creation of the symbolic structure of Angkor Wat, the design elements in performance that are treated as symbolic form, can reveal added meanings within the context of the dance. The diagram in Image 3 illustrates these ideas:

![Audience Seating Position](Plan View)

![Perspective View](Image 2 – Symbolic Performance Space)

The illustration in Image 2 shows how symbolic designs as performance space can affect the overall performance experience. By creating such design, the physical space is altered and, thus, the performance is also transformed. The purpose for executing such innovations was to highlight how design concepts as symbolic forms can be introduced to extend meanings in a performance that takes place within a particular designed space.

However, the idea behind creating such performance stage was to possibly create a new performance experience by integrating design as part of Indian dance performance. In this case, the performance of Indian dance needs to be conceptualised
and choreographed to embrace the symbolic stage space. Here, the seating arrangements for the audience are also taken into consideration and become part of the symbolically designed space.

For example, in the symbolic stage (Image 2), the four-sided elongated platforms are viewed as the four directional features of the Angkor Wat temple structure. These cross-section platforms are designed in equal length to become part of a square. The whole symbolic stage is designed within a circle.

The symbolic stage that envelops the idea of *Vastusastra*, therefore, can be argued as representing the fundamental concepts of Indian temple architecture. Earlier in the section on *Symbolic Concepts in Indian Architecture*, I explained how scholars, such as Champakalakshmi, Saraswati and Vatsyayan, expressed these ideas. In their writings, the symbol of the square represents a sacred space and the circle represents that which is secular.

The scope of presenting a dance in this type of symbolic stage can be interesting and challenging for the artist and choreographers. For instance, dancers can use the steps to enter the stage in different ways. The dance entry and exit can begin either back and forth from each direction or simultaneously from all directions. This type of integration between the symbolic stage and the dance can create an enhanced experience, not only for the dancers but also for the audience. The enhancements are first caused by the design of the physical stage, and second by the way it is used in the dance. The audiences experience the dance differently in respect to where they are sitting in the designed space. Each audience member, who is seated in-between the four-sided stage, views the performer and the performance from his or her individual
perspective angles. Such concepts of space movements are also referred in the *Natyasastra*, where the entry and the exit, which creates various pattern, is considered to reflect the ideas of ritualistic movement in a perspective form (Rao, 2001: 82-83).

Movement in space used in this manner, according to Chandralekha, allows the audience to experience the performance as the creation of a *mandala* form or creating the concept of *sachikrita* (diagonal view) (Chandralekha, 2001: 67), which is not possible in a plain viewing. She further elaborates such movement as,

> This inwards / outwards double dynamic of the *mandala* – one spatial movement curving [and forming] inwards towards the *bindu* (centre) and another flowing outward, radiating into expanding circles while intensely held by the *bindu* – is its basic strength. (ibid)

This way of creating ideas of space and movement, argues Chandralekha, is certainly not possible in the proscenium theatre. In her view, a different space needed to be created. She says,

> The proscenium stage usually succeeds in destroying the full dimension of *mandala* into a flat cutout, leading to visual aridity and aesthetic confusion. This is primarily because the proscenium stage is concerned only with projecting an image – a vertical / frontal relation with the audience as against the three-dimensional *mandala*, which creates a relation in the round. (ibid)

With such integration, the entries and exits of the dance also create visual impact of descending or ascending as though to imply the concepts of heaven and earth. Each step on the edge of the four platforms (Image 2) can also be used to present the dancers in various poses, as though to reflect the various sculptural poses found at the different tiers of a temple structure.
Further, the cross-section space at the centre of this symbolic design stage can be treated as a powerful space resembling the summit of Mount Meru. In this central-space, dance movements can be choreographed to symbolise “creation”, “transformation” or as a “revelation” that projects the central-space as being of the highest order.

In addition, lighting design in this created stage can be used to replicate a similar “revelation” of sculptural reliefs in the Angkor Wat temple that are illuminated by the passage of the sun. Dance movements choreographed as the four temple series-reliefs and the purposefully design stage can be illuminated by creating lighting design that resembles the revelation of the bas-relief in the four season, as is experienced in the Angkor Wat temple.

I would therefore argue that dance and the designed space when used well in this way can express the meanings that are projected in Angkor Wat. Such a physically designed space not only visually creates an enhanced experience, but also extends it to emphasise the notion of formless. This is referred as the representational function or properties of the created form. Thus, the symbolic stage becomes a symbol in space that permits the performer and the viewer to engage in the transformation of symbolic space, similar to that of Angkor Wat. In such engagement, the process enhances the observer’s mind to experience spirituality similar to that of a temple form – where the “squares inside circles represent the passage from material to spiritual planes” (Tresidder, 2006: 149).
The Lotus Temple

The popular Lotus Temple is situated on Kalka Hill, in Delhi. As the name implies, the temple is designed in the form of a lotus. The symbolic lotus, as I have explained earlier in this chapter, is a recurring symbol in the many art forms of India. Nonetheless, the topic expressed how as an individual form and how as an integrated form, the symbol lotus affects our perception. In this section, the study will expand on these perceptions to experience the lotus form in a different manner. It will emphasise how the modern architecture of the Lotus Temple stimulates a similar aesthetic and spiritual experience as the ancient temples. The idea here is to focus on this modern symbolic architectural form that also highlights on the concept of formless.

Indeed, the Lotus Temple, also known as the Bahai Temple,\textsuperscript{10} is a marvellous architectural concept of the twentieth century. Completed in 1986, it has been considered by visitors as equal in majesty to the Taj Mahal. People from around the world have marvelled at its unique symbolic form. The Lotus Temple is described as,

\begin{quote}
The superstructure basically consists of a series of petals arranged concentrically in units of nine on a podium. Two rows of petals, the inner and the outer, curve inwards like a lotus in bloom while the entrance petals encircle these but face outwards to function as portals to the central hall.

\textbf{(Frampton 1999: 199)}
\end{quote}

In my view, the design signifies the importance of definite geometry, which is also found in the ancient temples. The Lotus Temple with the number nine as a conceptual figure is signified as a revered numerical abstraction in the Bahai faith (ibid). To Hindus, the concept of number symbolises the human relationship with the “material

\textsuperscript{10} Bahai religion was founded in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century in Persia (Iran). Bahai’s teachings are based on three core principles: the unity in God, religion and mankind. It emphasises monotheism and interprets such doctrine as Trinity in a symbolic manner, rather than literal (in Eliade, M., Adam, C. J., et al, ed. 1987)
universe” (Tresidder, 2006: 164). In his writings, it is said that various numbers are assigned to represent “a god, a quality, a direction and a colour” (ibid). Thus, not only is the form of lotus important in the architecture of the Lotus Temple, but as in the Angkor Wat temple, specific numbers are also equally significant to the overall symbolic concept. This can be argued as supporting the thesis’ argument that when integrated concepts are incorporated within an artistic form, added meaning and significance of the form can be acquired.

However, the Lotus Temple, according to architect Fariburz Sahba, represents the Bahai interpretation of a temple. He contends that it symbolises “a fragile flower enshrining an idea, the idea of light and growth, a shelter of petals interposed between earth and sky” (Frampton, 1999: 199). Indeed, this denotes that the modern symbolic architectural structure was created to enhance in a visual form; the inner concepts of the Bahai faith. The Lotus Temple designed to conceptualise as a form between earth and sky space, stimulates an idea of spiritual experience.

According to Mircea Eliade, the essence of symbolic shapes created by humankind is a ‘manifestation of sacred world’ (Eliade and Apostolos-Cappadona, 1992). Symbolic forms, he says, orientate to produce meanings that are a “reference to the spiritual life” (ibid: 4). Further, these transcendental forms, which are visually present in our daily lives, can be expressed to symbolise the “lived spiritual” (ibid: 5) as symbolic forms that reflect this idea. Indeed, I contend that the idea of the Lotus Temple was designed to connect humans perpetually to the metaphysical truths of its symbolic form. In this case, the creation of the petals in a curvature and circular manner resembles the structure of the universe (Devraj, 2000), and thus, reemphasises the notion that Indian architecture is embedded with spiritual connotations.
In fact, Image 3 clearly encapsulates the concepts that are expressed to formulate the philosophical ideals of lotus. Even though the Lotus Temple architecture is considered modern, it is still able to reflect traditional symbolic forms. The creation was thus generated to emphasise the concepts of form that echoed the formless. In this instance, the formless state can be considered in the conceptual ideas expressed by the architect himself:

He found the lotus - rooted in mud, but floating “in utmost purity and grace” - had a place in the art, architecture and traditions of India's religions. It's seen in the hands of deities and princes - Buddha sits on a lotus, Shiva dances on one, he found a lotus-shaped prayer niche in a mosque, he saw the flower in the patterns of Persian carpets (Scrivener, 1987). [He argued]...the lotus flower, commonly red or white, has served as a symbol...of true spirituality (Devraj, 2000)

Moreover, to present the Lotus Temple form as a symbol of “purity” in a visual manner, the “petals” of the architecture were finished with white marble. The colour white, I argue, is also considered a symbolic expression to emphasise the temple’s transcendent notion. This colour as symbolic is also mentioned in western cultural perceptions. Wassily Kandinsky argues that white creates a sense of “silence” and suggests an expansion to the “infinite” (Kandinsky, 1977: 39). He compares this with
the concept of “nothingness” and stresses that the colour white also comprises multiple meanings (ibid).

In order to accentuate its symbolic meanings, the Lotus Temple was designed to reflect it as the floating lotus. To enhance its overall symbolic meanings, the design of water and light were incorporated as architectural components. Indeed, as Sahba notes, the inclusion of nine water pools surrounding the Lotus Temple further emphasised the power of lotus as an important design icon. Further, by incorporating water as a design element, the illumination of the external façade of the building produces a sense of the lotus “floating on water.”

Therefore, the Lotus Temple can be considered as one of the finest forms of modern architecture that is deeply rooted in ancient Indian artistic concepts and philosophical ideas. Moreover, it can be said that its marvellous architecture resonates to induce these ideas that transforms the Lotus Temple to a state of formlessness, that is, that which is beyond form or beyond function (Frampton, K., 1999: 99). Thus, the modern Lotus Temple in its individual form, integrates with light and water to produce and enrich aesthetic experiences in ways that engages the beholder’s mind.

**Integration of Symbolic Design in Indian Dance**

This section will highlight how icons of Indian expression are used in dance performances. It is also to study how the integration of design and dance can affect our perception and, thereby, creating another possible “seeing and reading” of a performance. It aims to explore the possible mediums that can be used within the

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dance. In that way, watching dance should not be focused on the bodily movement of the dancer alone, but also upon the overall form that is created within the performance space. This includes other theatrical elements that are perceived as symbolic components of dance. In order to understand this integration the section will examine how different dancers have used design as a symbolic element to express an additional or enhanced meaning in their dance performances. One such example is the performance of *Yantra*.

Indeed, the *Yantra* dance production by Chandralekha included various symbolic forms in space to accentuate the meaning of the dance. In observing the dance performance, Ananya Chatterjea says,

> In fact, *Yantra* begins with Chandraleka reciting the *Soundarya Lahari*; stanzas that are central to this piece and that she interprets in terms of the human body and sexuality. She stands in a pool of light on a stage set simply: a backdrop of red and black intercut by occasional lines of white – a large square piece of cloth hung from the back wall, on which sits an inverted triangle, folded around its edges to reveal surprising intersections of the red and the black, revealing more squares and triangles within the larger structures, offset by a red circle which sits in the center.

*(Chatterjea, 2004: 226-227)*

The description of the scene by Chatterjea denotes that the audience for the production of *Yantra* are presented with three different forms of theatrical elements in the beginning. These are the recitation, the symbolic stage design and the presence of human body. The first component, I consider as the element of sound and the other two I regard as visual components.

Therefore, I would argue that Chandralekha introduced these forms to deliberately present an opening that expresses the many-layers of meaning that are embedded within the *Yantra* dance. In order for the audience to experience this interrelationship...
and meanings of the various forms, Chandralekha interlinks these components in a harmonised way. This is evident in Chatterjea’s further analysis of the performance. She says,

[Chandralekha] speaks: “Centered in the immortal seas, encircled by timeless trees, this island jewel. Within this, groves of kadamba [a type of tree], and within this, the chamber of well-fulfillment gem. Here man is the platform on which she turns. Blessed indeed are those, the very few who see her here, the goddess mounted and melted in tides of pure awareness and of perfect joy.”

(Chatterjea, 2004: 227)

By reciting these verses visually, Chandralekha enhanced the viewers’ perception by engaging their attention to the symbolic forms on the stage. The symbolic forms, I argue, echoed the meanings of the recitation. Chatterjea further observes that, in order to extend integrated meanings, Chandralekha executed hand movements that immediately connected the audience to the symbolic setting. She says,

As [Chandralekha] speaks of the island jewel, [she] joins the tips of her index fingers and her thumbs to perform the yoni mudra, or hand gesture, that abstract symbol of female sexuality. The square enclosed within her hands echoes the square on the wall, striking the two major themes or pieces: the celebration of the infinite powers of sexuality, particularly of female sexuality, and the multiple energies that are brought to life and charged through the arousal of the female spirit and the conjoining of the opposite male and female forces.

(Chatterjea: 227)

Indeed, it can be said that Chandralekha’s intention of initiating these ideas did affect the way Chatterjea as an audience member was experiencing the performance. Further, her analysis of the Yantra dance in relation to the symbolic design presented in the performance space, voices her assumption that integrating design components can evoke enhanced performance experiences.
Therefore, I argue that the recitation, the symbolic forms and the hand gestures were all skilfully executed to induce a synchronised performance experience. The synchronisation of various forms to express the multiple meanings in a unified way, I argue, constitutes the notion of representing the one and the multiple as a formless state. As the ‘unified whole’ is considered a single form with various parts, it reflects the importance of integrating design in performance space to create a total aesthetic form.

In my view, such integrated concepts by Chandralekha are aimed to create performances that are meant to elevate the observer’s mind to a higher state of performance experience. The integration can also be considered as an expression that Chandralekha visualised. It produces the intended visual ideas in the dance. To demonstrate further the notion of integration, the study of the most celebrated icon in Indian dance, the symbol of Lord Nataraja will extend our perception and understanding of design elements in performance space. The following section will discuss the theatrical design as the concept of Nataraja – an expression of the dancer and the dance.

**Indian Dance as Spatial Art**

**The Concept of Shiva as Lord Nataraja**

The design form of Lord Nataraja is one of the main Indian art forms that encompass a vision of totality and wholeness. This icon is one of the most popular and important iconographies in the many doctrines of Indian art, that is, it represents many aspects of Indian art forms. The study of the grand statue will form the basis for the argument that representational design is an important element of form and its enhancement. It is
through such study that forms are generated to derive a formless state of seeing, understanding, and eventually, connecting.

The study of the symbolic form of Lord Nataraja is considered crucial to the ideas of ‘form and formless.’ This is especially the case when discussing the interrelationship of design and space in the context of Indian dance forms. The section will explore the form of Lord Nataraja as representation of the theatrical elements and show how such elements are integrated to produce the concept of theatre as a whole. It is to study how this, in turn, relates to the holistic idea of Lord Nataraja.

It is in this form, of Shiva as Lord Nataraja that the formless state of dance is conceived and performed in order for the formless to be experienced by the dancer. Indian classical dancers admire this icon and feel connected to it while in training or performing the classical dance.

As the embodiment of Indian dance, Lord Nataraja is praised with a special sloka / stanza that describe his magnificent form. Such description is not only confined to Lord Nataraja, but the entire concept of Indian dance can also be said to have been conceived from this unique verse. The verse portrays the elements of dance as representing the body (dancer), sound (music, lyrics), and visual (costume and setting) in a summarised way. The sloka that is ordained to this deity is as follows:

\[
\text{Angikam Bhuvanum Yasya,} \\
\text{Vachikam Sarva Vanmayam,} \\
\text{Aharyam Chandra Tharadhi,} \\
\text{Thvam Numas Satvikam Sivam.}
\]
The meaning of this *abhinayaka sloka* (expressional stanza) is profoundly defined in the *Abhinaya Darpana*, the other Indian dance treatise that emphasises the expressive modes. The *sloka* is explained as,

Siva, whose *angika* [body] is the world,  
*Vacika* is the entire language,  
*Aharya* is the moon and the stars,  
[To you] we bow the *sattvika* Shiva.

(Ghosh, 1957: 36)

The significance for the above stanza is revered, as Lord Nataraja’s posture and gesture (*angika*) are perceived as shades of movement – the cosmic motion. The idea of language, words or song (*vacika*) is referred as the multi dimension of rhythm and sound - reverberating everywhere. Such ideas of sound, according to C. Sivaramamurti, are denoted as the creative sound that represents Lord Nataraja. He says,

...when the drum is sounded, the fundamental grammatical aphorisms are revealed perfecting *vak*, the most coherent and immaculate expression, and as the revealer of this, he is the Lord of sound rhythm par excellence. Rhythmic sound would go well with pure dance, *nritta*, while sensible expression conveyed through *abhinaya* gesticulation, the language of dance itself, would form *nritya*. He is thus the creator of not only *vyakta* or *avyakta* sound, but the meaningless and the meaningful as well.

(Sivaramamurti, 1974: 82-83)

Finally, his adornments (*aharya*) represents the stars and moons (Kamala Vasini, 1992: 181). His symbolic dance is thus seen as the dance of the universe (ibid).

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12 The text was believed to have been written around the 3rd century AD. It includes 324 *slokas* (phrases), which characterize the various bodily gestures and expression as visual communicative tools in Indian dance. The word *Abhinaya* is derived from the term *abhi* ‘towards’ and *ni* ‘to carry’. Hence, *Abhinaya* means, ‘carrying the play towards’ (Ghosh, 1957: 7) the audience. The word *Darpana* means ‘mirror’ that is to ‘reflect.’ For further details, refer to Ghosh, Manomohan, ed. *Nandikesvara Abhinayadarpanam*, 3rd ed. (1957).
Hence, with these attributes, Lord Nataraja is considered the most important icon in the arena of Indian performing arts.

**Lord Nataraja in Indian Dance**

Students of Indian dance are taught the meanings expressed in the *abhinaya sloka*. They are also trained to represent those meanings by using symbolic hand gestures together with body and facial expressions. Thus, they visualise the symbol of Lord Nataraja and execute suggestive movements that embody the *sloka* in its abstract form.

The dancers, executing the meanings with specific hand gestures and limb movements, relate Lord Nataraja’s body to the universe, his speech to that sound (heard and unheard) in the universe, and his ornaments to jewels like the stars and the moon. Ultimately, the dancer strikes the famous dancing pose of Lord Nataraja (Image 4) to portray him as the embodiment of all these qualities and seeks his blessings before commencing any training.

The visualisation and presentation of Lord Nataraja by the dancers is considered as a 'form state' in their space-mind, but a 'formless state' in active space. Here, the formless state is referred to as the abstract sculpting of gestures to symbolise the meanings. The concepts portrayed by the dancers are manifested in a symbolic way to highlight Lord Nataraja as the “Supreme” (formless). However, to understand and experience these concepts in a visual form, the splendour of Lord Nataraja was formularised in a concrete form to suggest the meanings in their totality. The Image 4, considered as the magnificent form of Lord Nataraja, visually engages Indian dancers and artist alike.
To many dancers, the statue of Lord Nataraja is not just a sculptural figure, but also one that represents Lord Shiva in a dancing pose, aptly called Nataraja, the King of Dance. ‘Nata’ means to dance, walk, move and ‘raja’ means king.¹³ This literally means that he is considered the king of all movement, all motion and all dances (Coomaraswamy 1976, Gaston, 1982).

Lord Nataraja’s dancing form that also represents him as the ‘King of Dance’ says Kamala Vasini is acquired from his dancing skills. It is said that once in the process of dancing, Lord Shiva’s earring fell. Lord Shiva then danced so deftly that his picking up the earrings from the floor and restoring them to his ears went unnoticed. This Urdhva Tanndava (lifting of the leg) won for him the epithet of ‘Natesa’ (great dancer). He also danced the Ananda Tandanva - the Dance of Bliss, portraying the manifestation of the universe. As he was unrivalled in the art of dancing, he was thus

¹³ This icon is believed to have been created during the Chola dynasty in the twelve century. This total culmination of symbols represented the concept of Nataraja in an holistic form. Refer, Kaimal, Padma. “Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon.” The Art Bulletin, 1999: 390 - 392
named as Nataraja – the King of Dance. Hence, the worship of Lord Shiva in the form of Nataraja was created (Kamala Vasini, 1992: 184).

However, Lord Nataraja’s dancing form is not only expressed to represent his dancing skills. Indeed, Western art practitioners have also praised the image of Lord Nataraja. For example, the ethnomusicologist, Matthew Harp Allen, argues that the icon of Lord Nataraja was considered the central figure and “master metaphor” in the restoration of Indian dance. Moreover, he states that this figure was also regarded as the fundamental symbol that represented Indian artistic creations as a whole (Allen, 1997: 63). Similarly, Ananda Coomaraswamy described the form of Lord Nataraja as the “most spectacular product of Indian religious and artistic imagination” (Coomaraswamy, 1976: 47).

Undoubtedly, the concepts embedded in the iconography of Lord Nataraja were also perceived and defined beyond its visual form by many other scholars too. The icon of Lord Nataraja, as such, has also been studied not only by art lovers but also by scientist. The physicist, Fritjof Capra, writes that all motion in the universe to his understanding is thought and perceived as the dance of Shiva (Capra, 2000). In *Tao of Physics*, he notes that,

> The dance of Shiva is the dancing universe, the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another… [As such], for the modern physicist, Shiva’s dance is the dance of subatomic matter. [Hence], hundreds of years ago, Indian artist created visual images of dancing Shiva in beautiful series of bronzes. In our times, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance.

(ibid: 244-245)

In relation to Indian art and philosophy, the study of the iconography of Lord Nataraja has also been vastly researched and written on by scholars such as
Sivaramamurti (1974), Sthapati (1996) and Srinivasan (2004). They too have described in detail the ancient thoughts that are embraced in the image of Lord Nataraja. They argue that Lord Nataraja’s dancing image represents the numerous ideologies of Indian dance and its association with other art forms. It not only symbolises artistic thoughts, but also embodies scientific concepts (ibid).

Even though, Lord Nataraja’s iconography have been vastly researched and written about by many scholars, my interest in studying and researching this majestic form is based on its importance and influence as a theatrical element towards Indian performing arts. As Alessandro Lopez put it with reference to the study of karanas as dance texts, “Re-engaging with the Sanskrit textual material also stimulated research into lesser known aspects of performance practices described in these texts” (Lopez, 2004: 65).

The engagement with specific texts here ushers the significance of iconography in terms of the practice of dance especially within an intercultural context. These studies will provide an understanding of how such marvellous form has been created from a formless state. Its study is also aimed to show how other art forms are confined in the singular figurine in the form of Lord Nataraja. While there have been many acknowledgements of this relationship, there still are harboured misgivings towards the nature of the karanas, for example. Yet, the place and role of the stature of Lord

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14 Karamas are the dance units of movement as described in the Natyasastra. Many of these dance movements are found in the temples as sculptures and wall reliefs. To attribute to Shiva’s dance of the anandatandava, 108 sculpted karanas / poses were created to represent this dancing form.

Nataraja has always been known to point towards this aspect of form and formless, which defines the nature and understanding of sculpture and dance.

**Lord Nataraja and Enhancements**

Even-though Shiva as Nataraja is celebrated as lord of the dance, in my view the icon is also considered as the key model for developing and understanding the importance of enhancing the Indian dance performance. There are four aspects that symbolise Lord Nataraja as the classic example for such discussions. First, the iconography of Lord Nataraja is directly related to Indian dance theatre. The gestures of dance movements in Indian dance are believed by the practitioners and scholars to be that of Nataraja. Each dance movement and pose performed in Indian dance can be said to have originated from Nataraja. Second, Lord Nataraja’s conceptualised figure consists of the three most important theatrical elements of Indian dance: *Damaru* – the sound, *Agni* – the light, and *Shiva* – the dancer. All these elements are considered as integral parts to create the whole performance experience. Third, the icon of Lord Nataraja has been regarded equal in status to the *Natyasastra*. To the legendary dancer, Rukmini Devi, Lord Nataraja’s form and *Natyasastra* are perceived parallel to the *Vedas* (Meduri, 2005: 204, 206, 214; Allen, 1997: 64). This signifies Lord Nataraja as a visual representation of the *Natyasastra*. Lastly, in my view, the symbolic Nataraja is conceived as the representational form of a *mandala*. I equate this to the Indian dance theatre concept as formulating to the ideology of the *mandala*.

The purpose of studying these symbolic icons is to argue how Lord Nataraja’s form is conceived through the theatrical elements that encase the performance experience.
Shiva-Nataraja’s image represents the entire scope of theatre as a means to spiritual enlightenment. As argued by physicist and scholar K.B.N. Sharma, the symbolic sculptures and images are compacted in a total form for ways of “spiritual wisdom”. They offer a definite combined perception in uniting with the “ultimate Spirit”.\footnote{Refer to www. Sriramakrishnamath.org/magazine/vk/2005/7-3-4.asp (accessed June 28, 2005)}

To further develop the three aspects that I wish to discuss, I will first narrate the overall conceptual meaning that is found in the iconography of Lord Nataraja. Here, I refer to the text from Chidambara Mummani Kovai as quoted by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1976: 71):

“O my Lord, Thy hand holding the drum has made and ordered the heavens and the earth and other worlds and innumerable souls. Thy lifted hand protects both the conscious and unconscious order of thy creation. All these worlds are transformed by Thy hand bearing fire. Thy sacred foot, planted on the ground, gives an abode to the tired soul struggling in the toils of casualty. It is Thy lifted foot that grants eternal bliss to those that approach Thee. These Five-Actions are indeed Thy Handiwork.

Clearly, the excerpt above portrays Shiva-Nataraja as the very energy that orders the whole of creation. Thus, by understanding these concepts within the theatre environment, I envisage that everything that is produced in that space is seeking engagement with the concepts of Lord Nataraja. Significantly, the idea of the drum and the fire when introduced in theatre is intended to propagate the idea of sound and light, which continuously transforms and engages the performer and the audience.

This concept as argued by Coomaraswamy is perceived to represent the idea of drum as “phase alternation” and the fire which “changes” and “not destroys” (ibid: 79) as is generally mentioned in presenting the concepts of Lord Nataraja. This is to argue that the creative components of sound and light within the dance, aims to create performance as a means to enhancing an experience of being in communion with the
concepts of Nataraja. The sound and light design create and transform the performance space that governs the idea of Damaru, Agni and Shiva, the dancer.

My intention here is to analyse the performance experiences further, to develop the argument of this chapter, and to position the concept of ‘form state’ and the ‘formless state’, with regards to the iconography of Lord Nataraja. Through this study, I will explore the application of such concepts to show how they are developed in Indian dancing and presented in a given space. I will go on to explain why and how these iconographic concepts can be applied in this modern era in such a way that it strengthens the traditions of Indian dance and the arts. The purpose of such study is to develop traditional concepts and consider how they can be viewed and applied to the contemporary Indian dance. As such, it will unite the historical and cultural knowledge and give rise to intellectual theory and practical craft application.

In order to further discuss the concept of Lord Nataraja in this thesis, I will break it down into three concepts. These concepts are conceived from the ideas of theatrical elements that I believe are encompassed within the symbolic form of Lord Nataraja (Image 4).

1. **The concept of Damaru** as the notion of sound design/sound energy that is identified as the rhythmic creative energy.

2. **The concept of Agni / Fire, Chandra / Moon and Praba / ring of flames** as the idea of lighting design / light energy, seen as divine light.

3. **The concept of the visual totality in space** conceived and perceived in the statue of Lord Nataraja as the Mandala form (the Praba is also considered as this form).
In fact, these concepts of Lord Nataraja are perceived not merely as theatrical elements, but as symbolic forms that can be extended into the field of Indian dance creativity. Indeed, Vatsyayan identifies Shiva-Nataraja as “the supreme symbol of all aspects of life” and the “synthesis of all aspects of creative activity” (Vatsyayan, 1977: 3). Hence, I see this creative power emerging from the iconography of Lord Nataraja and represented through its various symbols, which can then create the synthesis of all art forms in Indian dance performance.

The Concept of Damaru

In his right hand, Lord Nataraja holds the hourglass shape drum popularly known as the *damaru*. It is said that the word *damaru* was derived from the word “dam”, which refers to the sound produced by striking the drum. In Indian cosmology, it is believed that this sound resembles the sound of creation and, thus, is the rhythm that pulsates and creates the universe (Coomaraswamy, 1976, Saraswati, 2004). In dancing his ‘ananda tandavum’ - the dance of bliss – Lord Shiva keeps his rhythmic resonance by striking the *damaru* while dancing. In her writings, Kamala Vasini explains the essence of the symbol of *damaru*:

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The *damaru*, a small instrument creates such tremendous noise as to render obscure the sound of the Vina. It is therefore a great symbol of creation in the hands of Siva. It represents the Sabda Brahman. It is said that Siva Mahadeva produced the Sanskrit language out of the Damaru. Thus the adjunctive signs and the symbols denote abstract and infinite qualities.

(Vasini, 1992: 214)

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17 This hour-glass shaped drum of Lord Shiva-Nataraja is also called *Udukkai*, in Tamil. This drum is also known to be used by the shamans to call on the spirits. It is also used in ritual ceremonies, and commonly seen in Buddhists tantric practices.

18 To the scientist, the rhythmic cycle of creation (*damaru*) is considered as the model of universe activity, where stars ‘born and die’ simultaneously (Donatowicz, 1996: 157)
On close observation, the shape of the *damaru* (Image 5) is a combination of two conical shapes that are narrowed at the centre. These two combinations are said to represent the male and female union, and the concept of creation.\(^{19}\) What I observed with these findings is that whenever a sound is produced, the sound created is in dualistic form. These are the male and female vibrations, which I consider the vibrant and graceful sound and rhythm. Hence, I argue that whenever a sound is produced, there must be a combination of the energy of *Shiva* and *Shakti*.\(^{20}\) Therefore, the combined sound produces the sound of creation.

It is said that when Shiva dances, he beats the “rhythm of eternal cycle” of “creation” (Donatowicz, 1996: 157) and the sound produced is said to represent the power of Shakti (Roche, 2000:61). The medium of sound created from the ‘*damaru*’ exists in two forms and is symbolised in the conical shaped drum, which represents *Shiva* as

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\(^{19}\) Refer to article: “The Rhythm of Music: A Magical and Mystical Harmony” (September 2003) at website: http://www.exoticindiaart.com/acrobat/music.pdf. Also, refer, Selbie et al. (1908), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol. 4*

\(^{20}\) In Sanskrit, the word *Shakti* means “power, energy”, from the root word “*shok*”, meaning “to be able.” Refer to http://www.sacred-texts.com/tantra/sas/sas17.htm (accessed May 20, 2006).
the positive force and Shakti as the negative force. This can be considered the power of creative force.

Likewise in creating the rhythmic beats using drums, percussions, ‘nattuvangam’ or any musical instrument in a dance piece, there exist the concepts of damaru which represents sound as Shiva and Shakti. I consider this as the “vibrant” and the “grace.” This can be traced back to the technique of theatrical forms that are traditionally presented in various Indian classical styles.

**Importance of Sound**

In the classical dance form of Kathakali, the various movements and expressions are accentuated by the dramatic modulation of the percussion instruments. Phillip Zarrilli (1984) observed that the Chenda drums are used to produce the vibrant ambience in Kathakali dance performances. He states that, “The chenda is a versatile drum and is most obvious during battles scenes or scenes of great excitement which the expert drummer through his various lightning quick rolls creates thunderous cascades of harsh sound in the midst of a battle” (ibid: 189). In contrast, the ‘itekka drum in Kathakali is used to create the effects of graceful movements’ (ibid). The former is especially used to engage vibrant movements by the male dancers, while the latter is generally used to accompany female dancers (ibid).

In this case, the dancer has to move gently or vibrantly to the accompaniment of the sound created. This does not mean that it only represents the male or the female movements, but it also represents the motion or atmosphere that is to be created in the
space. In this particular instance, the way in which the dancer moves to the different sounds can reflect the different types of energy used to portray various moods.

Needless to say, sound in the form of mood or in the form of different motions and rhythms, can be explored beyond the confines of traditional theatre. By using other means of creating sound, various expressions can be achieved. I will discuss this further in Chapters Five and Six.

The sound design in performances space, I argue, is the creative force that evokes space in different ways. The way the sound is designed can create different levels of rhythms and frequencies that enhance the performance experiences. “Surround sound”, for example, stimulates the senses to experience space in different dimensions. The rattling of Shiva’s drum, which is created by applying various tensions to the drum, produces the sound as “rhythmic pulsation” (ibid: 34), which I regard as the pulsation in sound design.

In fact, in Indian dance performances, sound, which was only presented by appropriate musical instruments in the traditional techniques, seems to have changed drastically. This is especially so when performances are done in modern theatre spaces with modern equipment. Indeed, in the artistic works of the great Uday Shankar, he used various percussion instruments in his performances. His main aim was to create music that either “heightened the effect of the dance or was subordinate to the movement of the dance” (Kothari et al, 2003: 22). By doing so, Shankar was more concerned in creating the essence of classical aesthetics of music in his presentation (ibid).
Hence, I argue that the creation of sound in a performance regardless of how it is approached (tradition or modern) is able to transform the space, and engage the performer and the audience. The important aspect is to present the creative ideas in a performance that is authentic to the spirit of Indian dance. As Vatsyayan states, the symbolic triangular shape and concept of *damaru*, clearly defines its purpose as the symbolic sound of the “past, and present and future” (Vatsyayan, 1997: 19). To the philosophical and artistic Indian mind, this is perceived as the sound of Brahman, the ultimate experience of sound as invisible force (Saraswati, 2004: 38-39), which I refer to as the intangible and formless state.

**The concept of *Agni* / *Chandra and Praba***

The icon of Shiva-Nataraja, which is commonly suggested with four arms, is seen holding the tongue of flames on his back left hand (Image 6). The form of flames is also seen as the circle of fire in the icon (Image 7). This symbol of fire is known as *Agni*.

In Hindu philosophy, *Agni* is considered as one of the most important Vedic Gods. This is described in the hymns of the Rig Veda, the Hindu ancient sacred text on
ritualism. The word *Agni* is believed to be derived from the Sanskrit word *Agnih*, which means fire. It is also referred to be derived from the Latin word *ignis*, as in ignition.\(^{21}\) This God is revered as the god of fire and is seen in the forms of “lightning and the sun” (Organ, 1974: 72). Nevertheless, the God *Agni* is said to have been created by Lord Shiva and destined to be in union with his creative powers (Subramuniyaswami, 1993: 63). However, the symbol *Agni* on the hand of Shiva-Nataraja is perceived differently.

In general, the concept of *Agni* represented in the iconography of Lord Shiva-Nataraja, is symbolised as the element of destruction. Coomaraswamy states that Shiva’s dance is the dance of “cosmic activity”, and quotes a verse from *Unmai Vilakkam* in which the element *Agni* is described as “fire [that] proceeds destruction” (Coomaraswamy, 1976: 71). However, the notion of destruction is further analysed by Coomaraswamy as an element of “transformation” (ibid).

Equally, I argue that the symbol *Agni* is not only meant to depict an element of “destruction”, but also symbolises the concept of “transformation” in the form of “light.” In addition, I would say that this concept can also be equally applied to the symbols of *Chandra* / moon and the *Praba* / ring of flames as presented in the icon. Alistair Shearer also defines the circle of flame and the fire on Nataraja’s hand as representing the act of “creation and transformation” (Shearer, 1993: 68). All these elements are visually designed to exhibit Nataraja’s nature as an infinite concept of cosmic activity.

\(^{21}\) On close observation at the design of the flames, as in the iconography of Lord Nataraja, the symbol of fire is curved. The root word “*ag*” in Sanskrit means to move tortuously or moving in windy directions. This is probably related to the flickering of flame or fire. Refer, Encyclopedic Theosophical Glossary, Online Edition, http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/etgloss/etg-hp.htm (accessed January 22, 2005).
The association of Lord Nataraja with the concept of creation (Damaru and Agni), can also be applied to the idea of sound and light in Indian dance performances. Such an abstract approach can also be considered an important creative element because it permits an enhanced conceptualisation of dance creation in an innovative way.

The imminent scholar, Calambur Sivaramamurti, states that the forms of the sun and the moon as Surya (bright) and Chandra (subdue) in the iconography of Lord Nataraja is also perceived as an “expression of dance” (Sivaramamurti, 1974: 24). I see this being of equal importance in using lighting design as an extended expression of dance, where lighting is also considered as a medium of communication. Therefore, it can be conceptualised to show that the element of lighting is also an element of dance.

Certainly, the idea of light as Surya and Chandra (the bright and the subdued) is well executed in the classical dance form of Kathakali. In the traditional performance space, huge oil lamps illuminate the dance of Kathakali. In this space, the lamp that is closest to the performer is considered the Sun and the other placed nearer to the audience symbolises the Moon. These oil lamps, which are considered ritual elements, act as divine energy and sanctify the space. Their presence creates a mysterious effect on the dancer, the surrounding and the audience (Zarrilli, 2000: 50, 52).

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22 The sun and the moon are also said to be represented as cymbals for the Lord’s musical ensemble and termed as tala and laya (Sivaramamurti, 1972: 2), the rhythmic cycle in Indian music.

23 Refer to article on Katha Kali and Sacred Dance, by His Holiness Swami B.G. Narasingha Maharaja at http://www.gosai.com/chantana/saranagati/html/nmj_articles/sacred_dance/katha-kali.html (accessed 7, 2006). The symbols of Sun and Moon is also mentioned in the ancient western concept to glorify it as divine form. Here, the Sun is signified as power and brightness, referred as the male divinity (Baal / Malchan – Lord/King), and the Moon as weaker light, regarded as female deity (Asherah / Astarte- Goddess of prosperity/star of heaven) – Refer to Donaldson (1860:13), Theatre of Greek.
The effect of this flickering oil lamp accentuates the dance, as it casts huge shadows in the background. The radiance or the luminosity from these lamps also heightens facial expressions and, hence, allows a sense of “bright and dim” stimulation in the dancer’s expressions. Phillip Zarrilli (ibid: 50) pinpoints this essence in Kathakali performance:

…outdoor performances were held all night under the stars, lit solely by large oil lamp (kalivilakku) at the centre stage. With its multiple, flickering wicks, the lamp emits a yellow-hued light which dances across the faces and hands of the actors casting shadows.

Zarrilli’s observation therefore, accentuates the magic of classical Indian dance, such as Kathakali. I would argue, therefore, that the performance of Kathakali is only complete when such lighting effects are used as a means of communion with the divine to heighten the performance experiences.

The use of natural lighting in the traditional performance space clearly implies that light is conceived as something beyond its physical form. Indeed, the light that is presented traditionally - for example, in the traditional theatre of Gujurat, symbolises the “light as manifestation of Shakti ("Power")”\(^\text{24}\) (Richmond 1971: 124). Concurrently, I would argue that the idea of lighting design in modern and contemporary performance space is to recreate the essence of light as “divine energy.” Therefore, light conceived and applied in that manner would accentuate its purpose as a symbol that expresses the ritual and spiritual elements of Indian theatre.

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\(^{24}\) This light is believed to be the “divine presence of Ambamata, the mother goddess of Gujaratis” (Richmond, 1971: 124). The Gujaratis are the native people of Gujarat state.
The Importance of Light

As I have discussed, the effect of light is clearly an important element in Indian performing arts. Generally, in Indian philosophy, “light” is perceived as a divine power. Here, *Agni*, as I understand the concept, symbolises the power of light as an element of “transformation.” This approach is equally important in Indian dance performances as a means of creating an enhanced aesthetic experience. Image 8 and 9 illustrate this concept:

Image 8 - Light as the divine power of transformation (from inner to outer)

In Image 8, the dancer strikes the pose of the Goddess Kali on centre stage (white spot). The dancer accentuates the emotions to express the fierce mood of Kali, synchronised with the accompaniment of music and lyrics. To visually demonstrate the expression as energy, a beam of white light can be used to capture the expression of the dancer. Gradually, an amber light (A) is introduced to express the intense emotion of the dance. To further express the fury of Kali, the expression as energy portrayed by the dancer is expanded by initiating the red light (B), layer by layer, that
goes beyond the performance space. This “going beyond” can be compared to the description by Wendell C. Beane, where the power of Goddess Kali is beyond all powers and transcends beyond any form. As such, she is given the name Adyakali, the supreme “trans-theistic symbol” (Beane, 1973: 57).

While the lyric is sung, the dancer executes and interweaves into various representational poses to demonstrate the supremacy of the Goddess Kali. The intensity of the “light as energy” is also amplified when various poses are executed to heighten Kali’s expression of anger, the so-called “fearful aspect of the divine” (Kinsley, 1975: 188)

![Image 9 - Light as divine power of transformation (from outer to inner)](image)

Subsequently, as the song proceeds to praise the inner tranquillity of Goddess Kali, the opposite idea to the lighting is applied. As the dancer-character becomes calmer (expressing the serenity of Kali), the outer red light slowly fades away, and a blue beam of light is introduced to express the mood of calmness (red and blue are also
associated with her divine characteristic colours\textsuperscript{25} and, finally, only the white light remains (Image 9).

The two Images 8 and 9, demonstrate how light as a divine form can be used to create “transformation” of divine energy in space. The first image shows the transformation from inner to outer (expansion) while the second shows the transformation from the outer to inner (absorption). These two types of transformations represents the divine light that expands from the Goddess Kali, and the divine light that is absorbed back into the Goddess Kali. This can be equated with the writings of David Kinsley, where he says, the power of Kali “proceeds from the Goddess and finally withdrawn into the Goddess” (Kinsley, 1975: 188). Goddess Kali is also regarded as the power of “all-creation and all consuming.”\textsuperscript{26}

In fact, the legendary bharatanatyam dancer, Rukmini Devi, also used light as a medium to transform and develop the idea of temple space in modern theatre. She used light to create sculptural and illusionary effects to project the inner dimensions of mythological themes (Chandrasekhar, 2005: 156). Avanti Meduri argues that by creating innovative design ideas, Rukmini sought to project a “new way of seeing” that would facilitate the “spiritual revival [stimulation] of the dance” (Meduri, 2005: 12). By conceptualising the performance in this manner, every one of Rukmini’s dance productions were aesthetically appealing and created uplifting experiences in the viewer’s mind (ibid: 13 -14; Nagaswamy, 2005: 75).

\textsuperscript{25} Refer, Erndl, Kathleen M. Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol, 1993: 4 – 5.

\textsuperscript{26} http://www.exoticindiaart.com/kali.htm, (access Nov 12, 2006).
Similarly, Projesh Banerji argues that in the many dance productions of Uday Shankar, the lighting designs were produced to create the aesthetic approach of Indian tradition and expression. He says that Shankar used lights to create symbolic idioms that initiated the idea of Indian sculptural effects, and in that way, transported the audience to a “heavenly kingdom” (Banerji, 1982: 96-97).

Hence, it can be argued that the use of lighting in Indian dance performances is designed to produce visual effects that are aimed to project spiritual ideas. In the examples of Rukmin Devi’s and Uday Shankar’s performances, the use of light to accentuate the meanings and to communicate them as visual representation seems to be crucial for the artist. Such an approach in lighting design highlights the divine energy that is contained in the performance. The most important aspect of such processes in modern space is the recapturing of the essence of traditional values that is found in Indian dance and its allied arts.

This is evident in the concepts of Lord Nataraja, where the light from the fire, the moon and the stars are revealed as divine experiences. Susan L. Schwartz elaborates this concept of light as symbolised in Lord Nataraja. She writes that “It also gives light, which hearkens to the light of wisdom, as in “enlightenment”’ (Schwartz 2004: 32). Therefore, the power of these symbols as light-design in Indian dance performances is meant to invoke similar ideals of light as elements of ‘transformation and enlightenment.’ This is associated with the concepts that are reflected in the iconography of Lord Nataraja. These concepts are also considered relevant to the concept of Nataraja envisioned in the form of a mandala.
Concept of Nataraja as Visual Mandala

The icon of Lord Nataraja as in Image 4, I argue, visually generates the effect of a mandala. The term *mandala* in Sanskrit means “circle or discoid object” (Leidy et al; 1997: 17). This term is also used to signify a “sacred enclosure”, mentioned in the Vedic scriptures (ibid). It is said that in the heart of such a sacred circle, a “deity or its emblem” is visibly portrayed (Stutley 1977: 178). It is in this concept that the “mandala represents manifestation of a specific divinity in the cosmos and as the cosmos” (Leidy: 17).

Indeed, Lord Nataraja is conceptualised as the cosmic dancer, where every movement in the universe is the notion of his dance. However, my interest is not to discuss *mandala* as space, but as a visual form. How is this concept prevalent in the iconography of Lord Nataraja?

Undoubtedly, Lord Nataraja’s form presented in its totality with the elements of *Agni*, and *Damaru*, is symbolised as the dance of the cosmos. The concept of cosmos is emphasised by the circle of flames, which is produced as a “halo”-like silhouette around the dancing figurine.

However, the circle of flames, according to the sage Sankara, is the circle of “Maya or illusion” (Sivaramamurti, 1974:30). He further specifies the symbolic circle as the “suggestive void” (ibid: 31). Arguably, the perception of Stutley as mentioned earlier and of Sivaramamurti, elaborates the idea of Nataraja as a *mandala*. In the circle of illusion is the central deity, Lord Nataraja, where all ‘creation and transformation’ is absorbed back into his form. Hence, his symbolic form can be perceived as a symbol of meditation (Levenson et al, 1996:11) or “spiritual upliftment” (Padma, 1988: xxi).
However to conceive Lord Nataraja as a *mandala* form, it can also be seen as “*yantra*” to emphasise its notion as *mandala*. Carl Jung states that the *yantra* is an instrument or visual symbol that is created for the purpose of concentration and contemplation (Jung, 1972). To Jung, a form that is represented as a *mandala* image is perceived as a powerful icon that permeates as “movement towards the unconscious” (ibid: 85). Likewise, I argue that the dance of Lord Nataraja presented in its totality as an icon, permeates our senses to experience its form state as “penetrating vision” (Coomaraswamy, 1976: 42).

Equally, as Sivaramamurti (1974: 31) says, the symbols are not only the representational forms of Lord Shiva, but are the “utmost utility for the very existence of the universe, nay, its sustenance itself.” Sivaramamurthi further argues that because Lord Nataraja’s form is visually symbolised as such, “they are his visual forms, seen and experienced by one and all” (ibid).

In my opinion, Lord Nataraja’s visual form that is created to highlight the concept of Indian cosmology also represents the concepts of a *mandala*. In that way, it produces an overall contemplative effect on the viewer. As Sivaramamurti and Alvan Eastman write, within the *praba mandala*, Shiva dances, adorned with all the symbolic ornaments that glorify his dance as the dance of cosmic activity (Sivaramamurti, 1974: 5, 284-285; Eastman, 1993: 16-17). Therefore, these attributions can be related to Indian dance theatre space, where the performance space is conceived as a *mandala* and the symbolic forms presented in this space can be considered as

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27 The circle of flames around the icon of Nataraja is known as *praba mandala*. *Praba* means light and *mandala* is to be considered the symbol circle. It is said that by Shiva’s swirling dance, the light from his foot create the entire ring of flames as illuminating halo of light (Sivaramamurti, 1974: 2)
ornaments. Both these concepts are considered as yantra, where every presented form within this mandala becomes an icon of contemplation.

Indeed, the performance space in Indian theatre is signified as resembling the ideas of Indian architectural space conceived as sacred space. Within the concept of traditional Indian architecture practice, the space is created by using the concept of mandala, a “ritual diagram” (Richmond and Richmond., 1985: 52). Both Farley Richmond and Yasmin Richmond consider this as a space that invites or unites the supreme power, rather than a “blueprint” for construction (ibid: 53). Therefore, the performance space is conceived as a form of yantra; where “a geometrical contrivance by which any aspect of the Supreme Principle may be bound … to any spot for the purpose of worship” (Kramrisch quoted in Richmond and Richmond., 1985: 52-53).

Hence, I argue that when Lord Nataraja and Indian theatre space are conceptualised as mandala, the use of any theatrical medium within this space is considered as the “binding element” to revere and propitiate the divine. Indeed, design elements in Indian dance are created and set forth to elaborate these concepts that permit the mind to contemplate on the created forms.

**Designing Form - Theory to Practice**

The concepts of Lord Nataraja, as I have discussed, signified how his majestic form has always been a figure to be admired and understood. The discussion showed how every symbolic element of Nataraja is linked to the overall symbolic concepts of his figure and how as a complete form it amplifies Indian cultural and philosophical ideas. Further, it is also extended to express Lord Nataraja’s dynamism in the field of
arts and to explain how these ideas can be implemented in the modern and contemporary theatre spaces.

However, the use of Lord Nataraja’s statue to glorify his ‘transcendental form’ in the Indian dance theatre space has been a controversial subject. Scholar Anne-Marie Gaston has observed that the placing of the actual icon in performance space has created contradicting ideas to the dance practitioners and scholars. She says,

[The legendary devadasi dancer] Bala never had a Nataraja on the stage…She preferred to create a devotional atmosphere by using abhinaya rather than by using ritual elements as stage props. Chandralekha, who began performing in the 1950s, comments: “No, if I feel worshipful I will not make a stagey thing out of my religiosity. It is totally phoney to put Nataraja on the stage…Mohan Khokar, a well-known authority on the dance, commented: I cannot stand those icons. Worship is your own personal business. I do not believe in having anything on stage which will distract. Often the Nataraja is so small no one knows what it is anyway.

(Gaston, 1996: 315-317)

Gaston observes that these critics, including dancers who began their profession in the early times, were generally opposed to the idea of placing the icon of Lord Nataraja in the performance space. However, these ideas were also seen as a contradicting issue, even though the icon is well rooted in the concepts of Indian dance theatre. Gaston in her writing says,

Rukmini Devi introduced the Nataraja image to assist in creating a temple on the stage…Yogam and Mangalam, who had active careers in the late 1940s and early 1950s: “Yes we had Nataraja on stage…This is because it is the cosmic dance of Siva. He is the symbol of our dance…Recent dancers, Kamala Lakshman…[said]; … I always keep Nataraja on the stage. This is because I feel the dance is for him. It is not for human beings…it is an offering to him.

(ibid)

Nonetheless, these contradicting critiques do not exactly represent the way that I visualise Lord Nataraja’s icon in performance space. For me, the icon should be used
to stimulate and refresh an experience. This experience includes the very concept of Lord Nataraja as constituting the “movement” of all forms in space. His presence on stage determines that every conceivable idea executed by using various mediums, including the dancer are presented on stage as an expression of Lord Nataraja’s symbolic forms and concepts. In order to represent this notion, there are major differences as to why and how I use the icon of Lord Nataraja in dance presentation. The following points stress the importance of how I visually represent the icon in performance space:

1. By not looking at his majestic figure in its realistic sense – to me the representation of Lord Nataraja on stage is not considered realistic but as a symbolic icon.

2. I contend that in order for the icon to be effectively presented on stage, it needs to be used in its symbolic context. This can be achieved by creating the figure in an artistic manner, as a constructed set to be placed on stage.

3. By such creation, the whole performance space is conceived as the creative force of Lord Nataraja and the artistic creation transpires as experience on stage.

Therefore, I would argue that the created figurine of Lord Nataraja as a symbolic set embodies the idea of Indian theatre and presents it as theatrical element. The Natyasastra states that any object presented as real on stage is considered naturalistic and any artistically created object for the purpose of performance is regarded as symbolic (in Gupt, B., 1994: 241). Hence, the created figurine of Lord Nataraja was never perceived as a realistic form and I did not have any problem in placing it on the stage when deemed appropriate.
Further, in order to better understand the concepts of Lord Nataraja, I constructed a life-size sculptural figure of his form. I did this, as I believe that one has to experience the creation of artistic work through the art of practice. Even though the textual research provided an adequate understanding of the concepts of Shiva-Nataraja, I wanted to experience the creation of his form that would probably give me an idea of how it was conceptualised. Therefore, the idea of creating the figure of Lord Nataraja was to experience the art and its concept by way of engaging in the figure’s creation. As Coomaraswamy argues, “In no other way, not even by direct and immediate vision of an actual object, is it possible to be absorbed in contemplation, as thus in the making of the images” (Coomaraswamy 1976: 26). The created sculpture of Lord Nataraja is shown in Image 10:

Image 10 - Lord Nataraja (life-size) - created by Saseedaran K. Anandan
While sculpting the statue, the various lines, contours, and symbols produced an immediate impact on me. As I moved my hand to create the figure, the experience was similar to that of dance movements. Each symbol represented its own dynamism in space. It was like creating an abstract language that was to be experienced by the viewer; in this case, the creator.

The painting was deliberately created using a single brownish colour to produce the bronze-like sculpture. In order to achieve a three-dimensional image, the single colour painting was done in multi-gradational layers. This layering of colours captured the essence of Indian classical dance. It reflected upon how the dancer creates many layers of expression to communicate the dance as visual poetry. Indeed, in creating the sculptural figure of Lord Nataraja, the process suggested an experience that was similar to presenting dance using symbolic gestures to communicate. Each icon created in the statue was like creating dance symbols that projected as movement in space.

In recreating the form of Lord Nataraja, the experience provoked me to visualise the iconography in two ways. As I sculptured and painted the icon, the first instinct that affected me was that, Lord Nataraja symbolic form is the concept of theatre. In him, rest all the elements of theatre. I experienced this while creating the elements of fire, drum, moon, ornaments and the dancing body. All this is revealed as elements of sound and visuals, which is what the theatre is all about. In further developing the three-dimensional figure, it also suggested Lord Nataraja as the symbolic form of a mandala. I experienced this as I created the praba, the outer most circle of flames. Every point appearing from the circle and within the circle generated an experience;
that these points were simultaneously emerging and merging, either from the navel or from Shiva’s third eye.

According to Vatsyayan’s study on the geometry of lines in Nataraja’s figure, the intersecting point is the central nabhi / navel (Vatsyayan, 1997:120). On the other hand, Vasu Renganathan in referring to Tirumular’s writing says that the centre of permeating energy in Nataraja is the point between the two eyebrows, the nerikkan / third eye. However, both Vatsyayan and Ranganathan referred to this point as the bindu, the very centre or source of energy; the point of consciousness of man (Vatsyayan, 1997:117 and ibid).

Therefore, the experience of creating the statue of Lord Nataraja suggested that every design form created in Indian dance space is solely for merging into this bindu. All theatrical elements within the mandala space are constantly engaged with the divine energy of Lord Nataraja.

Hence, the creations of designs in Indian dance performances are forms that reflect the concept of Lord Nataraja: the “embodiment and manifestation of eternal energy” (Devi, 1972: 28). Such a concept that has been embodied in the iconography, says Ragina Devi, “gave new rise to creative impulse to the arts of temple architecture, sculpture and dance” (ibid). For me, the idea of design in Indian dance is to seek these concepts. I will elaborate upon this in the next chapter, where dance, sculpture and architecture are conceived as the ultimate experiencing of Nataraja, within the Chidambaram temple.

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Conclusion

As I have discussed in this chapter, the concept of form and formless aims to explore how design forms in Indian dance theatre can be conceived and applied as symbolic forms. The idea of emphasising design in this manner is to project the hidden meanings / qualities and, thus, create the possibility for an enhanced performance experience. As Roche says, by conceptualising art in an iconic manner, every creative activity in that process will enrich the viewer’s experiences (Roche 2000: 61-62).

In understanding the fundamental theories of Indian art forms, I have also argued how physical forms produced in space do not represent all that the viewer sees. I have argued that they (that is, the physical forms) represent the notion of visualisation that is materialised from a formless state. By recreating actual form, the idea is to reconnect back to the significance of the form. In Indian art, it can be said to experience the created form as reflecting divine energy.

By studying the various architectural and sculptural concepts, the chapter also directed our understanding of how this form can be related back to the application of design in Indian dance. Further, I have also shown that by integrating various symbolic forms in Indian dance, a possible “transformation” is initiated. This produces a new aesthetic experience in the beholder’s mind and stimulates spiritual experiences.

Therefore, the idea of emphasising the concepts of Lord Nataraja in this chapter was to refresh its symbolic form as the ultimate theatrical experience. In doing so, the study was extended to show how the Indian art in general can be ordained to project the model of a mandala. Such a notion, I have argued, was meant to engage the
viewer’s mind in experiencing dance as a form of *yantra*, where dance and design becomes a subject for contemplation. This reemphasises the concept of formless – the transcendental experience of design in performance.

Symbols not only comprise concealed meanings that are to be discovered. They are also considered as visual elements conceptualised in a particular form so that people are engaged with its form in future time-space as well. Therefore, I consider that design symbols executed in Indian dance transcend time and space, and that transcendence is the very essence of Indian dance aesthetics.
CHAPTER 3: SPACE TRANSFORMATION

Introduction

In his writings on the significance of space in the creative process of an artistic work, Donald L. Weismann states that,

Space is all-pervasive and everlasting. It is present before the work of art is created, and it functions during the act of creation and the finished work. It remains after the work has vanished. How we ourselves, as living, moving bodies, perceive and react to our perceptions of space crucially determines what we call our orientation to the world. And since it is in the works of art that we can visually experience how others have oriented themselves to their worlds, it is prime significance that we consider at length the matter of space.

(Weismann, 1970: 139)

In reflecting to Weisman’s writings, it made me to realise that space exists everywhere and that space needs to be recognised in order for space to be reorganised. Why is there a need to do so? How are these related to Indian arts and the dance, and why is space transformation important?¹ These will be the crucial subjects of my enquiries.

The issue of space has constantly prompted many artists, philosophers and scholars to interrogate how it is perceived and how it relates to our very existence and the things around us. Some have conceptualised space as a structure that confines something, “a set of dimensions in which objects are separated and located, have size and shape, and through which they can move.” ² However, in my opinion, space can be understood as that which is not only confined to these assumptions, but expands beyond them. For example, even when one is writing a word or a sentence, there is space in the thought process and there is space when the thoughts are transferred as writings.

¹ The term “space transformation” or “transformation of space” is used in the thesis to mean a space that is transformed or altered by the use of various theatrical techniques as mediums for transformation.
Hence, space can be said to be holding a unique characteristic that is constantly being occupied and transformed.

However, there is also the conceptual space referred to as the inner space and the outer space of any kind of object, environment or location (Vatsyayan 1991: 381-384). Space is also referred to as the space within our mind, our dreams and within our physical form. Indeed, space has always been linked with the concept of "being", which is independent of mere existence.

Nonetheless, within philosophy, it is debated whether space is an ontological entity by itself. Many people view space simply as a conceptual framework that we use to define and discuss about the world.

According to Plato, space is not a function of a form by which it is defined; hence, it does not exist as such and is beyond perception (Hare, 1982: 12). For Aristotle, space is always related to an entity, and while space is three-dimensional, it is not infinite because it is contained within a body (Ackrill, 1981).

Nevertheless, this discussion of space for the artist is different because space is also thought of as creating an experience. It is in space that the artist engages with the work and experiences the work of art (Snyder, 1991: 443). Indeed, space is considered a valuable asset for an artist. Space leads the arts to other dimensional spaces. It is occupied, it is manipulated, it is rejected and it is visualised. Although space has all these characteristics, I would still argue that in whatever manner it can be perceived, it has always been potentially transformed.
We experience space everyday, differently. We are always bombarded with the vastness of space. Therefore, space is always there in existence for us to experience its presence. It is a fundamental aspect of the everyday’s relationship between the user and his environment (Kaj, 1991). Arguably, space, therefore, affects our perception, sight, hearing and experiences. Why then do we need to build something to contain space?

In an article on “concepts of space in contemporary art”, Januszewska recalls the three types of spaces that Aristotle associates with the ancient mind (Januszewska, 1991: 582). According to Aristotle, the first is defined as the “real space”, where the entire mass of bodies is actually present. Here, he states that the space is self-contained and, ultimately, is bounded. The second classification is the “potential space”, which allows for the possible presence of foreign bodies. The third concept of space is described as the “imagined space” or the “infinite volume”, where space is considered “motionlessness, timelessness and imperishableness” (ibid).

However, in the theatre and media field, Gay McAuley explains her interpretation of space within a performance as namely the spectator's experience of being in the auditorium and being part of the spectacle one has come to watch. In her view, spatial reality is paramount. She argues that it is only because the spectators are physically present in an auditorium that they can experience the shifts and alterations in their consciousness and those of, other spectators, the actors and the dramatic action on stage (McAuley, 1999). One can speak, therefore, of space being at work in every aspect of the spectator's experience of the theatrical performance.
In Indian dance forms, space has many different conceptual premises that I would like to take some time to discuss. This discussion will take the form of conceptualising the nature of the temple space and its design, as well as space in Indian philosophy and spirituality. Within this interpretation, I argue that the purpose of the designed space is not only for the physical interpretation, but how such spaces can create and enhance a specific experience. It is my contention that in contemporary practice, one can use design to interrogate the modern theatre space by bringing traditional and ancient concepts to that space.

In the various theatrical designs within Indian dance, spaces are created in ways that treat space as a living organism. In parallel, it is believed that our very presence in an ancient temple space draws our sensors far from where we are standing within the space to an inner space; the space of contemplation.

In Indian dance, space is transformed into a visual poetry. Through the art of suggestive language (hand gestures and expressions), dance creates an array of images and forms that convey a story. The dancer assumes various characters in various spaces, while the forms of these created characters are presumed to be 'there and not there.' The gestures allow the performer to transpose characters that are invariably seen and not seen by the audiences. Symbolically, space is being transformed to bring about objects and subjects in the form and formless state, which arguably proposes transformations of space. This space can be thought as both the inner and outer spaces of the dancer.
In this section, I shall discuss the transformation of physical space of the performance arena. We shall see how from the viewpoint of the performer and the audience, such transformation of space can affect a performance. This chapter will pay particular attention to the symbolic representations in space that transforms a dance space. I shall work towards answering a number of questions, including:

- How therefore does space transformation affect the dance?
- Can transformation enhance or elevate the experience of performing and the experience of seeing?
- What are the elements that define space in dance?

The principal idea here is to emphasise the effect of space transformation upon the performer and the audience. We see the space that is transformed, not only as aesthetic space, but also as a space of spiritual healing, a communion with space and time. Jal Pal Singh and Mumtaz Khan discuss these issues with reference to man made spaces that are transformed as sacred spaces for communion with the divine (Singh, Khan, 2002). Both argue that sacred spaces in time are transformed to imbue symbolic aesthetics references that become space for the Gods and for people to seek salvation (ibid).

Similarly, the idea of space transformation in Indian dance performances echoes such parallel ideas. Concurrently, we need to see how space transformation through the symbolic use of design elements such as lighting, sets and sound, transforms our perception, our very seeing and hearing. Therefore, when dance space is transformed for the performer and the audience, it can become a 'space of interaction', corresponding to that argued by Singh and Khan (ibid).
In order to discuss these spaces, the chapter is divided into three main sections. I will first discuss the history of the use of theatrical space within Indian dance, which necessitates a discussion of the architecture and function of spiritual space as reflected in the location and function of the Indian temple. Secondly, I shall analyse the concept of space transformation that I have identified as an integral component, not only of design, but of theatrical reception as well. Finally, I will describe conceptual experiences during my research, which I used to extend the understanding of space within a dance experience in Indian dance, not only in the past but also in the present state.

**Design Spaces in Indian Dance History**

In the past, Indian classical dances were performed in the temple space. This space is now replaced by modern and contemporary venues. These spaces include huge auditoriums, amphitheatres, community halls and open spaces. On special occasions, Indian dance is also performed in shopping or building complexes. In all of these spaces, we find that Indian dance is presented to the public as a means of bringing culture to the community. This leads me to ask a number of questions including: what does space mean in this instance? How is Indian classical dance looked upon in this space? How does the performer react to this kind of space? What was the essence of performance space in the past? Therefore, it is important to address how space was previously conceived in the pre-modern India. This needs to be explored in order to define the essence of space, as more and more performances are held outside the boundaries of the temple space.
In ancient times, space was the abode of the divine and great temples with grand dance performance spaces were created. These were known as *Nritta Sabha, Nat-Mandir* or as *Natya-mandapa* (Younger, 1995, Brown, 1983, Coomarawamy, 1965). The performance space was constructed as a huge hall, visible to audiences from three sides (ibid). Intricate decorations in the temples adorned the space to visually enhance the connection to the divine. Sculptures and paintings, transformed the temple into an “art gallery” (Raghavan 1958: 340). Every component of forms created by artisans in the temple was ordained as God’s creation. In all this creation, the artists envisaged the divine form. In that manner, artistic works were presented as an offering to the Gods. As Vatsyayan says,

> For the traditional Indian artist, regardless of the field in which he worked artistic creation was the supreme means of realizing the Universal Being. Art was a discipline (sadhana), a *yoga*, and a sacrifice (yajna). [...] The artist was indeed like the worshipper who saw again and again the Godhead and who attempted to re-create the ultimate state of realization through the specific technique of his art.

*(Vatsyayan, 1977:5)*

Spaces as temples are essentially built to congregate divine energy. It is through this temple space that Indian dance was seen as the dance form of the Gods. It is as though the Gods that are situated in this space came alive from their space-time capsule to perform. As such, the temple space embraced the art of dance and music and created an immediate effect on the performer and the audience, alike. The temple space was considered the very “centre of all its cultural activities” and it was here that the arts flourished as “spiritual exaltation” (Raghavan, 1958: 339).

Moreover, on special occasions the temple space was exceptionally ‘charged.’ Grand celebrations and festivals that glorified the Gods were performed through the arts of dance and music. The whole space was transformed to an ‘experience place’ within
the temple space (Michell, 1977: 62-65). In addition, not only was the space of the
temple transformed, but so too was the whole city as a sacred space also illuminated
(ibid). In fact, this was considered a ritualistic space and therefore every artistic work
in this space was seen to embrace divine energy (ibid).

Such spaces revered as divine energy, were also created in the temple caves. Initial
ideas of transformed space in cave theatres were evident during the ancient times.
Scholar of ancient theatre, Iravati, has pointed out that during the Mauryan time (322-
185 BCE), music and dance as ritual was performed in the cave theatres (Iravati,
2003: 189). In addressing such performance space as in the cave theatre, she cited
A.C. Bidyabhusan’s description:

The cave is 6’ high inside or even less in some places. At the far end of the
cave, is a high platform. The entrance to the cave is 17’ wide and the cave is
44’ long. At the centre it is about 12’ 10” wide and about 6’ high. On three sides
there are two tiers of seats, the inner set being two inches higher that the outer
one. The side with the double bench facing the entrance is 8’ 6” wide. The
seats behind the entrance are set rather lower than the rest. There are small
stone seats by the wall.

(ibid: 189-190)

This description by Bidyabhusan indicates that the cave space was well designed as a
theatre space. Necessarily, it was also configured to allow optimal viewing for the
audiences. Such an arrangement of space, I would argue was created to transform the
space and enable audiences to experience the performance in a very different form. In
fact, Iravati stated that the interiors of the caves were skilfully lit to produce an
ethereal effect (ibid: 191). The cave space was also designed in such a way that the
acoustic effects of tranquil echoes were created in the air (ibid: 192). According to
Iravati, the author of Natyasastra, sage Bharata, also favoured such effects (ibid). One
can argue therefore that even during Bharata’s time, the important aspect of
performance was to generate and enhance experience in the viewer’s mind, using various techniques.

Obviously, such space transformation in ancient times was well conceived and designed to create the intended expression in the performance. Concurrently, I argue that with well-executed design mediums, physical spaces in Indian dance performances can also be transformed to produce similar uplifting experiences.

The structure and ornamentations of the caves were deliberately designed to induce total participation during ritual circumambulation. The acoustics of one Ajanta vihara, or assembly hall (Cave VI), are such that any sound long continuous to echo round the walls. The whole structure seems to have been tunned like a drum. One can imagine what an overpowering effect these waves of sound vibrations...[inside] this sombre echo-chamber, filtered sunlight projecting on its walls glimmering patterns...[sound] booming and reverberating among ponderous colonnades.

(Lannoy, 1971: 43)

Richard Lannoy further argued that forms created in space are used to transform spaces that are not only produced to be seen as what the eyes sees, rather experiencing the space from multiple perspectives:

The Ajanta style approaches as near as it is likely for an artist to get to a felicitous rendering of tactile sensations normally experienced subconsciously. These are felt rather than seen when the eye is subordinate to a total receptivity of all the senses...It explores the non-visual properties of spatial forms...which cannot be [obtained] from a single, fixed viewpoint to which we are conditioned by the artifice of optical perspective. It could be said that the Ajanta artist is concerned with the order of sensuousness, as distinct from the order of reason. The logic of this style demands that movement and gestures can only be described in terms of the area or space in which they occur. Everything is foreground, everything is simultaneous, existing in the Eternal Present.

(ibid: 48 – 49)

Likewise, the various techniques used to create space transformation in Indian dance, constantly and predominantly seek for an ‘order of sensuousness’ and not otherwise. However, I would argue that this ‘sensuousness’ goes beyond what is presented as
mere aesthetics. For me, the aesthetic sensuousness mirrors a myriad of inner experiences. Hence, in my opinion space transformation has to be perceived and viewed from multi-dimensional angles. In that way, the space is enhanced to create a sense of everlasting impression on the performer and the audiences.

Indeed, in these modern times, Indian dance, whether it is performed in the temple or in the modern theatre, still holds strong to its traditions of theatre. The dancer, no matter what space she or he is in, performs by using suggestive language to communicate a story or dance theme. In its pure form, the dance is able to capture the imagination of the audience. To rejuvenate such an experience, I would like to take the reader on a journey in which I had the opportunity to witness a great artist at work. It was an evening of Odissi dance performance, a well-known classical dance style that originated in the northern Indian state of Orissa.

**An encounter with performance experience:**

Kelucharan Mahapatra, the greatest Odissi dancer and guru that I have known, visited Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in July 1997. He was secretly planning to perform his all-time favourite, 'Pasyati Dishi-dishi' (my eyes searching...). It is a love song of Radha to Lord Krishna, as sung by the poet - Saint Jayadeva of the Gita Govinda, a 12th century ever so beautiful text, brilliantly translated by Barbara Stoller-Miller. At sixty-six, this grand Master spontaneously agreed to grace the stage; a stage that was simply set against a black curtain with an altar on the right with the grand Lord Jagannath, his sister Subhadra and brother Balabhadra, to whom all Odissi dancers revere and pray. On the left, his six musicians were seated on a raised platform.
The Guru was to act the role of Radha (in the Vaishnava devotional or bhakti traditions of Hinduism that focus on Krishna, the mysterious Flute-playing, blue God, and Radha, His favourite Gopi is His Beloved). In this item, Radha prepares to meet Krishna. She is overjoyed at the thought of meeting Him. She beautifies and dresses herself with utmost care, thinking of pleasing Him, while reflecting on her encounters with Him. As time passes, she soon realises that Krishna has failed to come. She yearns, longs, pines, wonders and fears the worst about His absence.

It is here the Master's mastery and virtuosity captured my heart! He made me forget that he was a man, old, bald and wrinkly; but, instead, right in front of my eyes stood a beautiful, lovely, love-lorn maiden aching and weeping in solitude!.... His imagination and years of experience on stage created the image of a forest, a balcony, a room, a chamber, the snake, the tree, the branch that pulled her hair... a myriad of expressions! I was transported to another world. However, it did not stop here. Further surprises were about to come.

He meandered through the forest by walking down the stairs from the stage into the auditorium and into the audience. His gaze, his expressions as Radha connected with each person, asking about her Krishna and in 'her' exasperation making us feel anxious.

The expression on Radha searching for Krishna, transformed the space where the audiences were seated. Her searching was as though the audience space had become streets, garden, forest. I felt as though we were all, at times, shrubs, plants and other times actual people who Radha questioned and associated with, in her search for Krishna. She asked, "Have you seen my Krishna? Have you not noticed him? Where
can I look for my Krishna?" Suddenly, she turned towards where I was seated and asked in desperation the same questions. I could see all this pining in her face and in her breathing. I could feel her heart beat. I could not answer her pleas. I felt like going with Radha in search for Krishna. She was so helpless that one would undoubtedly feel for what has Radha might have done that would have made Krishna not want to be here even for a moment.

I was absorbed into this space; the space of pining, the space where two souls should meet. These were all the visuals that went through my mind.

Radha, with much misery, dragged herself back to the house. She stumbled upon the stairs (stage front steps), as though telling Krishna, "see Krishna, see... I will go through all this, just to see you for one more time!"

With a heavy heart, Radha fell into despair and, torn apart, fought within herself not wanting to go back. She forced herself up and, without any direction walked in the thought of Krishna. She held the curtain (black curtain drop on stage) and for the last moment, looked beyond the curtain to see if Krishna was coming. Radha disappears, leaving the audience in disbelief at Krishna's disappearance and Radha's heart, now behold, was in the hands of the audience. Such was the power of the great guru, the master of Odissi dance, or I should say, the king of Odissi dance style.

However, it is not just Odissi; it is dance, itself, that had such an impact. Every move, every gesture is seen, perceived and experienced. I was absorbed into that sacred space, and I presume everyone else who watched that night's performance was as well. I experienced the rasaanubhava or the relishing of the senses being immersed in the delightful experience of his soul.
The irony of the experience is that, in Radha's pining, I saw Krishna. In her eye, I saw reflections of Krishna. At that moment, I felt Krishna everywhere. I felt a sensation of 'blue' in the whole space.

If the entire performance experience is analysed, it is evident that this sort of experience can only happen when the audience and the performer are in close proximity. The audience is then able to sense deep into the emotions through the expressions of the dancer. The dancer on the other hand, conveys or communicates to the audience, such that they become part of the performer’s' emotional journey.

Those in the audience who had similar experiences were seated close to the stage. They were able to be absorbed into the dance journey. This close space of interaction I critically argue as the experienced space. Therefore, it is very important that such 'performance space' between the audience and the performer is carefully observed and thoroughly studied.

Indeed, while watching the great master performing, I was intrigued by a thought: if such bodily expression can be turned into something beyond its own form, surely designs in space can also convey something of the beyond, if it is used and directed to communicate an inner expression. This is necessary when the intention is to express or assist in conveying added meanings to the theme. The purpose of space transformation, I argue, is to dissect the inner expressions in various forms to allow them to be seen. This would further enhance and engage the performance. Even though I felt much connected to the performance, the idea of introducing design elements in such performance can create a potential meaning for the audience who may not have understood the theme. For example, lighting in the form of blue beam
could represent Krishna, as the color blue is associated with the Lord and commonly known to many in the audience.  

Design then becomes an “extended expression of space” for the performer and the creator. Such engagement and transformation, I would argue, becomes more intense when space-design itself interacts with the performer or vice-versa.

While there is no doubt that such power of dance can transform the space, it also highlights the importance of theatre as being a ‘living space’ (Aswathi; Schechner, 1989). Through various techniques theatre spaces becomes alive during performances. It is noted that by the “effective use of montage in regard to image, sound, form and color, Indian dance theatre creates expressive acoustic and visual “communication channel” (ibid: 57). I contend that such “living” spaces create experiences that arise from within the designed and transformed space. This theatre space and form, which creates ambience for engaging, can be found in the Kathakali theatre.

**Theatre Space – Traditional and Contemporary**

In Kathakali dance performances, space is considered as one of the most important features of total performance experience. The physical orientation of the space permits audiences to experience the space and the performance as a “total theatre.” To the performer, this created space allows them to interact with the space, thus

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3 In Indian art, color is also an important component to distinguish the characteristic of a particular form or expression. Various Gods in Hinduism are also specified with different colors that not only accentuate the idea behind these colors, but also generate appealing aesthetic connections to the features of its unique form. For details on form and colors in Indian art, refer: Havell, E. B. (1909: 340). These aspects are seen in the Kathakali performance, where different characters are portrayed through different colored mask and faces. Such expression of colors can also be used when creating lighting design in Indian dance theatre – creating colored forms and spaces.
enhancing their performances too. Phillip Zarrilli’s personal documentation of the Kathakali theatre space, signifies the magnitude of Kathakali, and reflects the concept of space transformation:

The theatre consists of main entrance…flanked by hand-carved stone panels…[Inside], the stone columns are set off with hand-carved stone dance poses, based on classical postures…The back wall…includes a series of mural paintings based on traditional Kerala wall painting designs and motifs…The *kuttampalam* theatre includes a series of brass hanging lamps, which when used provide natural oil lamp lighting for the entire theatre, similar to the traditional pre-electric lighting in Kerala’s temples…Unlike the [modern] proscenium stage which usually has a high raised stage with no direct access through the audience, the Kalamandalam *kuttampalam*, with the slightly raised stage area (only one step up) and with no permanent fixed seating, allows the performers direct access to the stage through and in the midst of the audience. Final confrontational battles are staged as in the outdoor setting as torch-bearers and drummers accompany the challenger through the audience.

(Zarrilli, 1984: 161-164)

In contemplating on Zarrilli’s detailed account of Kathakali theatre space, I am overwhelmed by how the creation of such spaces greatly affects the whole performance experience. Not only does the audience feel mesmerised by the space inside, but they are also absorbed into the dramatics of theatrical space right from the entrance. In fact, it clearly illustrates how design elements are integrated into the performance to highlight the essence of theatre. I consider this as “total vision.”

In contrast, Western theatre practices conceptualise this kind of space as “total theatre” (Innes and Innes, 1993: 49). This expression in the West is commonly premised upon the physical appearance of the space, rather than considering what it signifies (ibid). As such, designs of space in the West are conceived as mere material / physical presentation of forms in the theatre space; whereas, in Indian dance theatre, symbolism is the primary essence to performance communion.

\(^4\) The essence of theatre is to recreate a different world that will enable the audience and the performer to experience something beyond their every day life. Every conceivable idea is applied from the beginning to engage the mind.
Arguably, the idea of design as a form in Indian dance is not meant for physical interaction alone, but also for interacting with the symbolic meanings hidden within the designs. Such a symbolic space can be argued as creating an aesthetic experience too. Vatsyayan argues that this feeling leads the audiences to a state of “transcendental experience of bliss” (Vatsyayan, 1977: 6). In this process, the worldly space or the stage space according to Vatsyayan is transformed to a heavenly space (Vatsyayan, 1991: 381). Further, Zarrilli argues that the idea of space transformation in the Kathakali traditional theatre, suggests reflections of the “cosmic stage” (Zarrilli, 1984: 213). In that manner, every element of design is conceptualised as a ‘total synthesis of the arts’ and continuously resonates as “divine” forms in space (ibid: 212-213).

I would therefore argue that the space transformations that are revealed as divine forms, presents the theatre of Kathakali as having a ‘total vision.’ This vision, which is perceived as experience through the integration of Indian dance and design, invokes a “deep spiritual realisation of the Divine and the Infinite” (Vatsyayan 1977: 12). Such experiences, I argue, can be enhanced through the synthesis of various art forms. This permeates to transform the performance space in totality.

As Zarrilli argues, the “shadowy” effects, the “transformation of the performer”, the “sound environment” and the amalgamation of art forms, constitute the power of Kathakali theatre that, ultimately, projects it as a “total theatre” (ibid: 212). Thus,

5 The symbolic qualities in Kathakali theatre includes the use of huge oil lamps as religious symbol, stool that is used as a seat or as representing descend and ascent actions, the use of mask, colored make-up, costumes, “red-eye” and accessories to represent different characters. Further, it involves the use of silk curtain to create majestic appearance of Gods, demons and legendary characters. These are emphasised by the use of drums and cymbals. The performer leaps, gesticulates, mimes, moves about and acts out the story to symbolically recreate the intended meanings. The moving shadows that appear from the flickering oil lamps in Kathakali theatre is considered as one of the most mystical powers of the traditional dance forms - the dance of the Gods (For further reference, refer: “The Kathakali Theatre” in The Tulane Drama Review by Eugenio Barba and Simonne Sanzenbach, (1967: 37-50).
Zarrilli’s argument of ‘total theatre’ includes all of these elements to seek communion with the divine (ibid). In that manner, all these components are considered as theatrical elements that enhance the performance experience.

In order to determine how space transformation can affect the total performance experience, an ideal comparative study is presented in the next section. In the first example, the physical space was not considered important. In the second example, space transformation was regarded as a crucial component in re-creating connections to tradition.

**Modern theatre space – Not transformed**

As the house lights in the auditorium were dimmed, there was an announcement made to introduce the Kathakali dance performance from Kerala Kalamandalam, India.\(^6\) The narration described how Kathakali was traditionally performed. It described the theme and context of the performance, and explained how normally it would be performed grandly in a conventional space. The purpose of such an introduction I believe was to transport the audience imaginatively to that very traditional space.

In the performance, the entire auditorium space was faded to darkness and, in that space, the sound of the thunderous drum (*chenda*) was heard. I anxiously waited for the scene to begin. When the main curtain opened, a sudden flash of bright lights illuminated the stage space. This was followed by the dancers and musicians

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\(^6\) The performance was performed at the DBS auditorium, Singapore. I was fortunate that the organisers allowed me to be with the artiste to witness first hand experience of seeing how the elaborate make up and the costume brought alive the characters. The artist also related to me the experience of such performances back in India, where the performance ambience is very important for the artist and the audience - everything in the space actually creates the total effect (a personal conversation with the artist).
appearing on stage (Image 1)

Image 1- Kathakali dance performances, Singapore

My excitement, however, quickly diminished. There were no huge lamps, shadowy effects, no temple atmosphere or any kind of character entrance from the audience as perceived and practiced in traditional Kathakali theatre space. Even though the dance retained its traditional techniques, the magnitude of its magical synthesis of all art forms was greatly reduced.

In contrast to the earlier discussion on Kathakali traditional theatre space, the essence of its total majestic form was hampered in this modern space. As I sought to connect with the performance, I was constantly bombarded with the following questions: what was there in the traditional space that was not present in this modern space? How can space be represented as was traditionally staged? How can space itself bring about enhanced performance experiences? These were the immediate reactions that I had, while watching the Kathakali performance in the modern theatre space.
The argument on space transformation in this chapter aims to constantly question how space can be represented to recreate a similar experience to that found in traditional theatre space. This is not to argue for a realistic representation, but to utilise symbolic designs that will engage the audience visually within a theatre space. In fact, as Zarrilli observed, the design of the Kuttampalam theatre was created to engage the performer and the audience in experiencing theatre differently (Zarrilli, 1984: 161-164).

Indeed, the concept of space transformation in Indian dance is not about realistic presentations as is typically the case in the Western theatre, rather it is about representational designs that are able to communicate and transform the performance into a spiritual experience. This is created in order to recapture the essence of space that is present in traditional theatrical presentation. The “essence”, I would argue, can be envisioned as the primary mode of space that reflects itself as “divine dwelling.” This is evident in the space transformation that is characterised in the production of Kutiyattam Ramayana, created at The State University of New York.7

**Modern theatre space - transformed**

In contrast to the earlier example of the Kathakali dance performance in modern theatre space, the following Image 2 presents a very different scenario. This transformation of space emphasises the recreation of the essence of traditional space that can be experienced once again.

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7 A detailed view of the production and the processes involved in creating the space are available from www.rfdesigns.org/kuti.htm (copyright permission granted to use image).
Image 2 illustrates how the space for Kutiyattam Ramayana performance was designed. It clearly created the picturesque effect of a temple space. In fact, Richard Finkelstein states that the space was transformed as a spiritual space to create close connections between performance and audiences, similar to that of traditional Kutiyattam theatre. Finkelstein argues that this space was created as a means of “transporting” the viewers to the Kutiyattam conventional roots. In this manner, he says, the transformed space enriched the performance experiences as a “spiritual dimension.”

To reinforce the idea of creating such a design space within the modern theatre space, this was also supported by the practitioners from the Kutiyattam traditional theatre (ibid). In order to create such space, Finkelstein says that “two masters of the form” from India lead the whole process of creating the symbolic space (ibid). These processes developed an uplifting experience for Western theatre practitioners to

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8 These analyses were based on the writings by Richard Finkelstein: www.rftdesigns.org/uti.htm. (accessed June 7, 2006).
understand how Indian theatre is not created as mere entertainment or the “doing of shows”, but a divine and sacred experience (ibid). According to Finkelstein, this was possible by engaging closely with the Indian practitioners and involving in the process of creation to understand the inner qualities of the Kutiyattam traditional theatre (ibid).

Indeed, I believe that such approaches to space transformation are integral to traditional theatre practice. In this manner, the space can become ‘alive’ and uplift the performance experience. In fact, the objective of space transformation in Indian dance is to focus on the essence of creating space that emphasises not only the mere physical creation, but also spiritual engagement from the moment of initial conception. Thus, space itself becomes sacred. In a similar vein, Kapila Vatsyayan says,

An enclosure is identified physically or conceptually. For that time and duration of the event (performance) it is consecrated space in circumscribed time. Terrestrial space is transformed to ‘celestial space’ and the ‘microcosm’ signifies the ‘macrocosm’. Process and manifestation evoke an experience of transindividual and personal.

(Vatsyayan, 1991: 381)

Certainly, the modern theatre space that is transformed, I would argue, visually creates a sense of “closeness”, similar to the traditional space. No doubt, that the modern theatre space is not able to re-create the total effect as in the traditional space, nevertheless, space transformation can create an enhanced experience for the performer and the audience. As Vatsyayan argues, such creation of space is similar to the traditional practices of formulating the concept of space as a ‘cosmic universe.’ Further, she believes that this can transform a mundane experience to one that is spiritual (ibid & 394).
To further understand the notion of how space creates an enhanced experience, the following section will explain the concepts of ancient space and symbolic space as a means of connecting and seeking a higher purpose. The aim of this section is to reemphasise how space in Indian art is conceived and experienced. It is also to highlight how by understanding “space”, performance space can be created to reengage the ‘essence’ of theatre space. I shall draw upon my own experience to demonstrate the creation of performance space from the perspective of a dancer and designer.

**Space and Design**

Space can be affected by the way it is designed. It affects our engagement through the manner in which a particular space is arranged within a larger space. Space can be perceived as contained space or as space between objects. In the traditional Indian approach to building construction, the plan and quintessence of creating form and space is much enveloped by the concepts of *Vastu Shastra*.\(^9\)

In Indian philosophy, *Vastu* science expounds that when space is contained by introducing an enclosure, it becomes a living organism. It also ascertains that, in such spaces, there exist rhythmic vibrations which are closely related to the inner spaces within our body (Michell, 1977: 61-62).

Indeed, when space becomes an entity of harmony, it is believed to create an

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\(^9\) *Vastu* or *Vaastu* literally means physical environment and *Sutra* or *Sastra*, means the principles/knowledge or text/ scriptures. *Vastu Sastra* or spelled as *Vastu Shastra* is an ancient science of Indian architecture which goes back to the Vedic ages. Ancient temples were built in accordance to this text. Today it is also vastly practiced in developing the science of energy flow through the design of modern buildings encompassing the energy of space and natural lighting. For further details refer, Fergusson, James et al. *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 1967 and Kramrisch, Stella. *The Art of India: Traditions of Indian Sculpture, Painting and Architecture*, 1965.
immediate communion with the universal space. This harmonised space, the inner and the outer, is thought to permit the dweller to experience spiritual bliss (Vatsyayan 1991: 381). However, in the case of Vastu conceptions, the temples and images are not mere symbols, rather they are created to exist and function as vibrant living organisms (Kramrisch, 1965). Therefore, I argue that space affects our experience when it is transformed to function beyond its physical form.

Throughout the thesis, I make frequent use of the term "divine abode" to reflect on space that is transformed from a physical entity to a spiritual atmosphere. Such space in Indian dance for example is not conceivable, however, without understanding the relationship of sculpture, architecture and dance to space. The three elements are combined through integration and positioned within the spirituality of the space and performance. Hence, to discuss “space transformation” is to argue about space that is experienced by the performer, as well as the audience. It is in this transformed space where it is possible to visualise and experience the presence of divine energy. In the case of temple architecture, this energy is created through the various Vastu techniques; for in every measure of creating the space, there is “breath” or the “prana” (Kramrisch, 1965: 15). Kramrisch argues that it is through such practice of creation that the space invites the divine forms (ibid).

A useful analogy that helps to explain the concept of the divine as 'form and formless”, (discussed in the previous chapter) and relates directly with space, is found in the well-known 'Chidambaram' temple. This temple is situated in the east-central part of Tamil Nadu state, India. In the concept of the Chidambaram temple, we find the combination of sculpture, architecture and dance space as a whole. This study is important because the idea behind the concepts of Chidambaram emphasise the
notion of Lord Nataraja. It is the only Indian temple that is fully devoted to dance architecture and exemplify the ultimate interrelationship of form, space and time, thus its significance to Indian performing arts. Before analysing the concept of Chidambaram, I will explain the general ideas that are embedded in the creation of a temple-space.

Generally, temples built according to the concepts of *Vastu Shastra* are oriented in harmony to cosmic directions. Hindu temples invariably face the east, as this is considered the auspicious direction of the rising sun, whose first rays illuminate the interior of the shrine at dawn (Brown, 1983: 64). The light that shines into the space transforms the ambience and illuminates the forms within that space. Percy Brown argues that such visual revealing “symbolise[s] the entry of god into his own temple of the world” (ibid).

Certainly, this illumination of spaces and forms by sunlight, which in Hinduism is revered as Lord *Surya* / Sun God, further enhances God’s own image in space. It can be argued that even though the temple space itself is considered sanctified, there is need for another ‘medium’ to transform the godly form and space as a “heavenly dwelling”. Likewise, in Indian dance performances, design elements are introduced in dance as a form of ‘medium.’ The ‘medium’, in the form of lighting, symbolic sets and sound, is created in the performance space to transform and enhance the performance space as the ‘dwelling of the Gods.’ It is purposely materialised to accentuate the aesthetic beauty of the divine.

In fact, temple spaces are physically orientated to enhance the space transformation. This clearly defines how architectural concepts can affect the forms in space. In
observing such transpiration in the Indian temple architecture, Brown expresses the beauty of such transformation as the dwelling of divinely forms:

The Indian temple was, in the language of the people a “dwelling place of the gods”, for, in addition to the symbol of the deity within the cells, numerous niches, recesses, alcoves, and altars, were provided as part of the architectural scheme, within which were enshrined sacred images of the immortals, so that the whole structure resolved itself into a place of assembly of the Devas, or “Shining Ones”.

(Brown, 1983: 62)

Brown’s expression of space as the “dwelling place of the gods” and “place of assembly of the Shining Ones”, proposes an idea of space that needs to be designed to engulf such transformation. These two quotations signify the importance of the interrelationship between space and the physical forms that are present in a space like the temple. I contend that it is crucial to engage other mediums such, as light, when designing these spaces in order for this interrelationship to occur.

Moreover, such encounters of mediums with architecture not only enhance the spaces and forms, but most importantly, that they enhance the observers’ experiences. The sunlight that illuminates the interior is perceived as giving life to the forms in the temple space. Therefore, the transformed temple space leads to darshan, that is, the phenomena of seeing and being seen by the Gods (Eck, 2002: 171), while the artistic transformation, enhances it to become a tirtha, a sacred space (Champakalakshmi, 2001: 17).

These ideas are also found in Western architecture. For example, light is regarded as a medium for God’s presence. A beam of light that passes through coloured stained glasses in churches enhances the whole space. To Christians, the transformation that takes place in the church is considered a highly spiritual space that revealed “heaven
on earth” (Brown, 2004: 260).

However, Indian temple architecture was given various names to accentuate the meanings of such space and to express an ultimate purpose beyond its own physical form. The Indian temple space is known by its various Sanskrit names. The Indian temple is termed as *Prasada, Vimana, Devagriha, Devayatana, Devalaya* and *Mandiram* (Michell, 1977, Champakalakshmi, 2001). These names symbolise the idea of the temple as a means to reach for higher purpose. It is considered as a bridge to another realm. As Champakalakshmi explains, these attributes point to a single meaning; that is, the temple is to the devotee and pilgrim a *tirtha*, sacred space. Through such ideas, they experience the temple as an “abode and body of divinity” (Champakalakshmi, 2001: 96).

Indeed, in the temple space, the innermost sanctum is considered the most significant space for one to contemplate the ‘bridging.’ It is here that the main deity is housed. This innermost space is considered the central force of energy that expands outwards and, by contemplating and observing the deity in this inner space, a person’s senses are drawn back and forth. According to David Dean Schulman,

> Moving inwards in space and backward in time, the devotee proceeds from brightly lighted exterior space to darkness, from larger open spaces to confined small space, from richness of carving and decoration to the simplicity of the unadorned centre. Space is focused like a converging beam of light upon the centre, becoming ever more constricted and confined as the *garbha-grha* [central womb] is approached. The individual is pulled and drawn to the centre by the organization of the temple. It is the centre which provides personal renewal and rebirth paralleling the renewal and rebirth of the universe.

(Malville, 1991: 128)

Therefore, I argue that there is a constant flow of space transformation as ‘energy’ within the temple space. Indeed, in the writings of Schulman, it is apparent that by
organising space in a certain manner, a central point of focus is achieved. Moreover, by creating such spaces, a unique transformation takes place between the seeker and the space.

The temple space also includes other artistic creations that are organised to revere space in a different manner. Apart from the main images in their niches, images of the Astadikpalas, (the guardians of the eight points of space) are given specific positions in the temple, in accordance with the Vastu Shastra (Champakalakshmi, 2001: 14).

These points of directions are similarly visualised and propitiated in the classical Indian dance forms. For example, in Bharatanatyam dance style this propitiation to the guardians is usually performed in the invocatory item. The dancer with hands in anjali (salutation) position faces the eight directions of the performance space while presenting the opening item. Through such gestures, the dancer seeks blessings from the eight Astadikpalas. In establishing such movements, the performance space is considered sanctified.

According to Vatsyayan, the concept of propitiating the space is also symbolised in the Manipur dance style. In the dance item of Nata Sankirtana, a special enclosed space (mandapa) is erected to conceptualise the space as cosmic axis. Within this space a centre pole is erected, which symbolises the unification of heaven and earth. Around the enclosure, eight pillars are established to signify the eight “cardinal directions” of space. These eight pillars also symbolise the eight “sakhis for the vaisnava” (Vatsyayan, 1991: 381, 383). All these physical embodiments say Vatsyayan are generated to transform the space, in its totality as a sacred space. The

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10 Sakhis (plural) or Sakhi (singular) is a general term in Sanskrit, used to represent a maiden or a friend. In this case, it refers to the eight girl-friends of Lord Krishnan
intention is to engage and evoke an experience in the performer and the audience (ibid: 383,384).

However, in the temple spaces, the various forms that are created in the space are all conceptualised as one or as a holistic form. This is to say that the temple as a whole (inner and outer space) was designed to project its sacredness. The creation of “wholeness” is very important to Indian temple architecture. Such creation of space, argues Vatsyayan, “lead Man to the experience of wholeness and totality” (Vatsyayan, 1991: 381). Equally, the various forms created in a holistic manner, project the temple space as a divine “vehicle”. Heinrich Robert Zimmer, the German Indologist and scholar, says that the Indian temple space created in its totality was seen as divine realm. He says,

An earthly temple of this type is called a “chariot” (vimana) and is to be thought of as a huge car of infinite dimensions flying in the heavens and moving at will – like some vast air liner in the stratosphere, or rather, a whole fleet of such liners with passengers soaring back and forth independently between. The vimana is a heavenly caravan of residences for innumerable celestial inmates, all enjoying the presence of the god...

(in Zimmer and Campbell, 1960: 45-46)

Certainly, the temple space is a space that is designed to encompass divine forms. In this space, the seekers who gather to receive darshan are seen by the Gods and are absorbed by the transformation that takes place in the temple-space. I contend that the whole temple space, which creates a transformation, can be conceived as the space where the Gods and mortals meet. In this space, the observers or participants’ senses are uplifted. It creates an inner experience in the observer. The temple space thus, becomes a divine vehicle to transport the mortals and the Gods to a celestial kingdom as is expressed in Zimmer’s writings (ibid). Therefore, temple spaces were created to accentuate these ideas.
The concept of Indian temple as a divine vehicle or cosmic chariot is also presented in a tangible form. The structure in the form of a huge chariot, which presents the space as a divine vehicle, is clearly visible in the architectural layout of the Konarak temple in Orissa, India. This temple is generally known as the Sun temple. The name Konarak, is believed to have been derived from Sanskrit words, Kona, which means corner and Arka, which means Sun (Donaldson, 1985: 407). In order to create these concepts in space, the temple space, says Benjamin Rowland, was transformed as a colossal chariot. He says,

One of the most striking features of the design of the temple is that the entire sanctuary was conceived as an architectural likeness of the god’s chariot or vimana [italic mine]: around the circumference of the basement platform on which the temple proper rest are affixed twelve great wheels intricately carved in stone [ ], and to complete the illusion of the solar car, colossal free-standing statues of horses were installed in front of the main entrance, as though actually dragging the god’s chariot through the sky.

(Rowland, 1967:173)

Indeed, I argue that the temple design as a chariot in earthly space was created to transform the earth space into a divine space. I would further argue that its symbolic form in space functions as a visual contemplation for human to reach a higher state of consciousness. By engaging with such spaces, Coomaraswamy argues that such transformation of space by means of aesthetic forms, truly exhibits the space as a medium to “heightened aesthetic consciousness” (Coomaraswamy, 1965: 72). It is this “heightened experience” that I argue can be similarly created in the concept of space design in Indian dance performances. Indeed, spaces for Indian dance when potentially transformed become spaces for aesthetic contemplation towards the divine.
This aesthetic consciousness was initially experienced by people who explored the cave space. In the earlier sections, I explained how the concept of inner and outer space as seen in the Indian temple architecture was initiated from the idea of mountain caves. In fact, the Indian temple structure closely resembles the shapes and forms that are perceived in mountains. Significant to these concepts, the Indian temple is conceived as an ‘architectural tower’ that represents the idea of a mountain. This sacred symbolic relationship between mountains and Indian temples is clearly apparent as the Sanskrit names denotes; Meru, and Kailasa, which signify the mountain as the centre of the universe and symbolises as the mythical mountain (Michell, 1977).

Regardless of the overall conceptual design, in every Indian temple the core emphasis is on the ideology of a mountain. This idea is either applied to the overall design of the temple space or to individual spaces within the temple space. However, the idea is to create ‘heightening of experiences.”

Indeed, mountain symbolic concepts, such as the dark chamber or cavern / cave, often mysterious and believed to house a secret (rahasya), have many other associations with the temple space. In such mountain spaces, the space was designed to engulf the shadowy effects. This was created by designing the space to be illuminated either by sunlight or lighted / burning torch. The effect created by these lights, revealed the mysterious space that was encased in darkness. In reaction to this designed space, Percy Brown argues that the idea of mountain art was to stimulate the senses to experience the mountain as a “womb”, where the secret space was “released” by the transformation of space (Brown 1983: 66).
Similarly, in a temple space, the “womb or the garbha griha”, is situated in the innermost chamber of the temple space (Wu, 1963: 22). This chamber is constructed with a single doorway and without any other openings or windows. Within these defined spaces, the temple inner chamber is known as the ‘secret space’, where the true form of the deity is placed (ibid). This inner chamber in the temple space is transformed during special occasion to reveal the beauty that lies within. Brown states that during temple occasions, the whole atmosphere is revealed when illuminated (Brown 1983: 66). During that process, when light from the torch creates mystical shadowy movements of the Gods, the image of the Gods comes alive (ibid).

In such revealing or space transformation, it is my contention that such applications as mentioned by Brown are meant to stimulate an experience. Certainly, one could therefore ask whether the temple-space transformations described by Brown address the importance of design elements, such as light and form, to create an enhanced experience in a particular space. Such enhancements as conceived by Western philosophers are associated with the aesthetic concept of the “sublime” (Mitter, 1977: 121). However, Pseudo Longinus argues that this concept not only provokes a state of delight within the viewer or participants, but also creates the “effect of carrying away” (ibid). In my view, the process of creating such “sublime” design and enhancements can be applied to Indian dance performances to elevate an experience. The difference in such application is that ‘sublime’ aesthetic experiences to the Indian practitioners go beyond what is conceived and practiced in the west.

In Western philosophy, the sublime is thought as a platform for reasoning a work of art. For example, Kant argues that in a work of art, the sublime is said to be an overwhelming object that is rationally comprehended (Kant, 1952). To this, Henry E.
Allison suggests that Kant’s appreciation of beauty in all art as sublime is “logically conditioned” (Allison, 2001: 272). This aesthetic beauty or aesthetic experience is conceived through what is presented in a physical form. However, in Indian aesthetics, the sublime is not only considered or understood in terms of perceived beauty, but as something that is created to produce or reveal communion between the work of art, the creator and the viewer. Indeed, in the Indian theory of the sublime, a work of art is seen as a symbolic representation that is forwarded as an experience of the Supreme, Brahman (Mishra, 1998). As such, the work of art “remains the sublime object that, ultimately, defies all representation in time and space” (ibid: 16).

Certainly, I would agree that physical spaces are created to experience the sublime, but the physical space can also be experienced as a medium towards communion with the divine. Therefore, spaces are transformed to be experienced beyond their physical forms. Undoubtedly, Brown’s concept of inspiring temple spaces can be represented in performance spaces through well-conceptualised design forms. I contend that the creation of spaces using design elements in Indian dance performance can be intended to transform the space as ‘symbolic to the inner chamber of the temple.’ In these created spaces, one can visualise dance as the worship to a deity.

Moreover, the concepts of transforming space are also conceived as “secret chamber,” to rekindle the divine presence in the observer’s mind. This process aims to provoke “contemplation” within the performance space as a space for the divine dance and, thus, reveals it as the ‘divine abode’ of the Gods. In such transformed space, I envisage the space as a reunion place for Gods and mortals. This was evident as in the case of the temple-space. What then is the ultimate purpose of transforming a particular space within a given space?
To clarify this issue, the best example would be to conceptualise the created space as a means of ‘bridging to another realm’ (Champakalakshmi, 2001; Malville, 1991). This realm is beyond any space. The purpose of such space is to allow oneself to be immersed into the transformed space. However, these spaces need to be visually enhanced in order to create this experience. In fact, this is exactly what the ancient sages and artisans did; they sought to represent space that absorbed the mind to an ultimate experience of the Supreme divine.

The space that I will use to illustrate this concept is the space where Lord Nataraja resides, in the temple-space of the great Chidambaram. In this space, he is not only seen as a form, but is beyond form. This space was created visually for humankind to experience the meaning of space transformation in a deeper sense. This space is also recognised as the ‘divine abode of Lord Nataraja’. The concept of this space is to visually exemplify that “space as divine” is experienced as space that projects “emptiness.” What does this mean? The following section illustrates how this temple-space is perceived and why I regard it as similar to the ultimate purpose of space transformation in Indian dance.

**Chidambaram - Space that is beyond**

While the exuberance of Lord Nataraja as King of Dance is conceptualised and represented as a majestic visual figure of dance (which I have discussed in the previous chapter), his form also signifies ‘conceptual space.’ To further elaborate this concept of Lord Nataraja, a special temple was built. This ancient temple, which is

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11 In earlier times, the temple was called Tillai. This name was derived after the plants that were wildly growing near the vicinity of the temple. In the Tamil Saivite, it is also known as *Kovil*, which literally means, the temple. It said to be the most important temple for the devotees of the cult of Siva. Refer, Natarajan, B. et al. *Tillai and Nataraja*, 1994.
well known as Chidambaram, is located in the district of Cuddalore, South India. It is said to be the most important temple dedicated to Shiva-Nataraja. Its magnificent architectural and sculptural concepts have continued to amaze scholars and art lovers from all over the world.

Usually, temples of most religions are built in specifically designated spaces. It is believed that the stipulated space is sacred and by building a temple within that space, it will commemorate its sacredness (Scott and Simpson-Housley, 1991: 27). In this space, the boundaries of the temple are clearly defined and specified. Within that defined space, the entire architectural design of a temple is built. Therefore, the design structure of a specific temple is restricted and confined within the defined space.

In the case of Chidambaram, the temple was built to go beyond all boundaries; to include the tangible and the intangible. It was built to create the concepts of Lord Nataraja beyond any definite form and space. Furthermore, rather than being confined to a particular spot / space, Chidambaram was built as a city; one that could, overtime, expand beyond its original boundaries.

The temple’s latest developments were undertaken during the kingdom of the Cholas. Over the proceeding eras, it was progressively expanded and elaborated by various rulers to highlight the supremacy of Lord Nataraja. Such emphasis to

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12 The Cholas were a Tamil dynasty (10th to 13th century), who ruled primarily southern India and later spread over to north-west of India and part of South-East-Asia. During this time, great works of Indian architectures were built and remarkable Tamil literatures were produced. Temples were a place for cultural, economic and power growth. Refer, Rawlinson, H. G. *India: A Short Cultural History*, 1965

13 The temple was initially built by the great Simha Varman, also known as Hiranya Varman, who belonged to the solar race. During the reigns of the Pallavas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagar, this temple achieved great heights in terms of its architecture and reverence. Refer, Natarajan, B. et al. *Tillai and Nataraja*, 1994.
glorify the deity, argues Padma Kaimal, not only created environmental effects, but its expanding focus also affected the people spiritually (Kaimal 1996: 59)

Indeed, Chidambaram is also known as the “centre of the universe” (Kaimal, 1999: 406). Not only is the Chidambaram temple seen as a specific place, rather, its form is conceived as space that is created to emphasise “divine space”, beyond any imaginable place. However, in order to be conceived as an integral space, Chidambaram is also considered as the “core of the physically perceived universe” (ibid: 406). Therefore, it was seen as a space that exemplified it as a focal space for spiritual contemplation (ibid).

In transforming a particular space for Indian dance, I envisage the concepts of Lord Nataraja when creating such space. For me, the space as ‘centre of the universe’ is a space beyond the created space. It is a space to be experienced. While the designed space in Indian dance can be presented physically, the idea behind the creation is considered superior to the presentation itself.

As Paul Younger points out; this concept of transformed space supports the whole idea of space transformation. In referring to the Chidambaram temple, Younger wrote that,

...the dance in the sacred hall of the temple, on the other hand, came to be thought of as “centering” the cosmos...so that a normal [seeking] experience in [Chidambaram] becomes a pilgrimage involving “separation” from the structures of society, engagement in “communitas” with others in that most unusual place, and [reaffirm] a “reentry”...

(Younger, 1995: 183)

14 In Sanskrit, the term Chidambaram means “the heavenly abode of the Spirit”. This was later known as Citrambalam in Tamil, meaning, “little hall”. The latter was known for its earlier structure of the temple. Refer, Kaimal, Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon.”, 1999: 406
Younger’s comments on the significance of such space, clearly suggests the importance of creating space within a given space. Clearly, Chidambaram is also physically presented as being the centre of cosmos; Younger’s expression says that, it is in the inner chamber that the real transformation takes place. It is here that the dance space can become the ‘divine abode.’

In a similar approach, within a specified performance space, spaces are enhanced to aspire for a higher purpose. Arguably, the purpose of such creation is to constantly engage with the space as a ‘pilgrimage space’ – a space for interaction and contemplation. It is in this transformed space that space itself allows ‘re-entry’ for the performer and the audiences alike.

To signify the ultimate space of dance, the inner chamber of Chidambaram was designed to house the huge majestic bronze figure of Lord Nataraja. The inner chamber is called the Cit-Sabha, which is profoundly described in Siva’s hymns and stories. In Sanskrit, the term ‘Cit’ means consciousness and ‘Sabha’ means hall. Hence, this space is called the “Hall of Consciousness” or the “Sky of Consciousness.”

The Cit-Sabha space was conceptually designed to reflect the idea of the ultimate hall of Siva’s dance. In this space, the visual designs are created and presented to reveal the space of Lord Nataraja’s dance as the space of transformation. I would therefore argue that this space is created to reflect upon the space as a ‘state of consciousness.’ In order to perceive such concepts, the Cit-Sabha space is visually presented.

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David Smith describes the space thus:

Within the Cit-Sabha is a further stone plinth set back about 1 m with a wall behind it, while beneath Nataraja and Sivakamasundari to his left, this is fronted with gilt panelling, with the plinths of the two murtis rising above this. To Nataraja’s right is the Cidambaram Rahasya, where several strings of golden bilva leaves hang in front of a curtain. The curtain is 1.5 m high and 3.5 m long, extending behind Nataraja as well as covering the Cidambaram Rahasya. It is made of two layers, the inner one red, the outer one black: illusion outside, enlightenment inside.

(Smith, 1996: 88-89)

I contend that the purpose of the imaginative visual representations described in the interior space of Cit-Sabha, is to stimulate and intensify the experience of this space in the eye of the beholder. According to B. Natarajan, this space is only revealed at a particular time of the day with a grand ceremony (Natarajan, 1994:181). This can be seen as a way or means to accentuate the devotees’ experiences.

As Smith noted, every element of the visuals, such as the plinth, the back wall, the gold panels and the abstract leaves, is presented as a delusion or Maya. Eventually, says Sivaramamurti, when the curtain is raised, all that is revealed is an abstract form of Lord Nataraja as “akasa / space” (Sivaramamurti, 1974: 383).16 One is intrigued to ask, why all these illusions and abstractions?

I would argue that the ultimate aim in creating these suggestive spaces as “something beyond” is to allow the senses to be absorbed into the experience of the conceptual space. Without such presentation, different spaces cannot be conceived and our very physical experience of space will be diminished. Therefore, for people to experience the divine, various spaces were created to intensify the God’s ever presence in space. Indeed, it was for man to search for his interconnectedness with the particular space.

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16 In this space, Shiva is perceived as the “nature of the sky” and, therefore, is seen as dancing in the sky. This is also referred as Chidambaram and the dancing hall is known as Kanakasabha, (Sivaramamurti, 1974: 383).
This interrelationship of space can only be achieved when there are two spheres of existence that allow people to experience different spaces. It is through these spaces that an illusion or *Maya* is generated. According to Stephen Cross, *Maya* is simply a name for something which can never be explained. It is the hiatus between two different realms of being; the interface between Reality as such and the provisional and apparent reality which the individual self experiences and exists in. (Cross, 2004: 66)

This expression emphasises the importance of space that is transformed to induce an experience, which connects the crossing point between two spaces: the real and the unreal. In order to reveal the “non-manifest” from the “manifest” (*Maya*), Vikramaditya Prakash argues that aesthetic creation is necessary for such a transformation to take place (Prakash, 1997: 45). However, the sphere of *Maya* is also observed as a space of enlightenment (Smith, 1996).

In my view, the space in Chidambaram as a reflection of “illusion” that leads to “enlightenment,” is also manifested in the designed space of Indian dance. In transforming space, the design elements function as “mediums to cross-over”. The space is transformed to allow the senses to be in communion with the created space. As such, representational space in Indian dance is conceived as the space in Cit-Sabha, that is, the space that stimulates an experience or a spiritual union.

However, the greatest experience of Cit-Sabha space is known as the “Chidambaram rahasya” (Sivaramamurti, 1974; Smith, 1996). It is also said to be a “secret space” (ibid). I consider these expressions of space as the ultimate purpose of space transformation. This is not as secret space per se, but as “space that reveals.” Hence, space in Indian dance is transformed to enhance performance experience, where the
divine abode is revealed. In this space, I see the transformation as the ultimate aesthetic experience of the Supreme.

According to Badarayana and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the aesthetic experience is the state of “ananda / bliss” (Badarayana and Radhakrishnan, 1968: 257) and is “equated to space” that “shines everywhere” (ibid: 263). Correspondingly, that which is transformed in performance space, I argue, reveals the designed space as an expression of divine enchantment.

Indeed, the dance of Lord Nataraja in the Cit-Sabha space is known as the “anandatandava, the dance of bliss” (ibid). This is to show that the Cit-Sabha space is emphasised to create the dance as an experience of bliss. In the same manner, space transformation in Indian dance is created to seek for similar ‘bliss’. The bliss experienced through space transformation is well expressed by Sivaramamurti. He says:

The removal of the veil [or the curtain] is just the removal of the ignorance, and behind the veil is the real truth – sat, chit and ananda,\(^{17}\) representing the Nataraja form himself...Concentration and contemplation on the deity that dances in the lotus of the devotee’s heart is only for the achievement of this purpose, and it is from this point of view that all these sabhas [halls] are conceived as great spots for the bloom of the flower of wisdom and final beatitude.

(Sivaramamurti, 1974: 383,385)

Therefore, what is created as transformed space in Indian dance finally surfaces to rejuvenate experiences similar to those noted by Sivaramamurti. The transformed space created by design elements is considered a space that eliminates the “veil of reality.” When the veil of reality is removed, what remains is the space to be

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\(^{17}\) In Hinduism, these terms are said to express the ultimate bliss that the seeker wishes to be in communion with the divine. In searching for the truth, it is said that one removes the “veil” and what remains is the experience.
experienced (in many ways, a symbolic aesthetic space). Within this space, dance is experienced as seeking for communion. Ultimately, I envisage such space as that which blossoms into a divine abode and emerges as ‘space of enlightenment’ for the performer and the audience.

The following section, will demonstrate how these spaces can be designed and created in an actual performance space. The intention is to create a symbolic space that is also aesthetic in form.

**Designing Space – theory to practice**

To further explore the concepts of space as discussed in the earlier sections, I undertook a project that allowed me to develop the ideas of space transformation. I envisaged this space from the perspective of a dancer. In this created space, the intention was to present spaces that speak volumes of the wonders of Indian architecture and its relationship to Indian dance.

I created this space for a *bharatanatyam* dance debut, performed in Perth, Australia.\(^{18}\) Image 3 shows the performance space that was created to transform the performance space similar to the concepts of temple-space.

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\(^{18}\) This performance took place on the 27\(^{th}\) February 2006. The idea of transforming the space was initially not welcomed by the dance Guru (whose views, I understood and respected). After seeing the space transformed and specifying how the space could be used to create similar experiences of temple space, it overwhelmed the Guru’s and the accompanying artists’ experiences (Feedback conversation).
The initial idea in creating a potentially transformative space came from my experience of creating the sculpture of Lord Nataraja. In the previous chapter, I explained how I experienced the inter-connection in understanding Nataraja’s symbolic forms. However, having recreated Lord Nataraja’s majestic form, the next important step was to conceptualise him in a space.

Hence, the idea of transforming the performance space for the **bharatanatyam** debut dance was based on the concepts of Indian architecture with a particular reference to the Chidambaram temple space. The space was created to emphasise the impression of the inner chamber of Lord Nataraja. In this space, I visualised the **bharatanatyam** dancer seeking to immerse herself with the Lord. Even though, Lord Nataraja’s dance is said to dwell in the hearts of his seekers (Sivaramamurti, 1974; Smith, 1996; Kaimal, 1999), transforming such performance spaces to re-establish the concept of “inner chamber”, seems to translate as the “heart” of Lord Nataraja’s dance.
Further, in the dance space, to reproduce the effect of light as “revealing” in the ancient cave and temple architecture, a similar approach was applied. In this designed space, shadowy lighting effects were produced. In addition, to develop ideas on how lights create shimmering effects upon the temple forms, directional lights were used. This approach aimed to create the idea of a rising sun, illuminating the inner chamber of the temple spaces. Moreover, by visually integrating lighting effects, this enabled the audiences to experience the space that was similarly transformed by the effect of light and darkness as in the temple spaces. 19

In addition, the transformed space allowed the dancer to interact differently with the created space. During each item, the entry and exit of the dancer through the spaces between the pillars visually generated the idea of the dancer entering temple space from different directions. In producing such transformative space, it created an effect akin to that of dancing in a temple space. For me, it was specially to recapture the experiences similar to the dancing in Chidambaram temple. As they say,

To be a great dancer you have to have bhakti or devotion. You have to have a religious feeling. I have seen it in people who dance on stage but it is definitely there during the festival in the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram. The dancers dance the night before in the compound and then the next day in the temple in the sanctum. The entire aura is different. You begin to realize that this is what it was meant to be.

(Gaston, 1996: 336-337)

In a similar thought, and as discussed earlier, the designed space of Chidambaram was created to exemplify Lord Nataraja’s concept of space. Arguably, the Cit-Sabha space within the temple was designed to symbolise space that “reveals”, so that

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19 On the performance night, I received this feedback not only from the audiences who witnessed the dance, but also from the music accompaniments and the Guru of the dancer who at first had reservation towards such space design and its relationship to Indian dance. In fact the dancer too felt much connected to the dance and space when she could visually experience the form and space of Lord Nataraja.
seekers could be mesmerised by the space itself. Therefore, I assert that such symbolic presentation when applied in modern performance space can similarly play an important part to enhance the relationship of temple space with Indian classical dance forms. In the case of the debut dance performance, the performance space was transformed to emphasise the presentation as an expression of dancing in the Cit-Sabha hall; where Lord Nataraja resides.

Therefore, I would argue that the transformation of the performance space, even though was physically presented, the idea for such transformation was perceived beyond the physicality of the created space. It was visualized and experienced as being in the temple space of Chidambaram and making connections to that which is there. As Rama P. Coomaraswamy says,

> Form the traditional point of view, the world itself, together with all things done or made in a manner conformable to cosmic pattern, is a theophany...In the dogmatic language of revelation and of ritual procedure this general language is reduced to formulated science for the purpose of communication and transmission. Thus the arts, which from the traditional point of view are also rituals, derive their origin from an "intellectual or angelic level of reference...When this is mythologically formulated, such level of reference becomes a 'heaven' above. Then the artist, commissioned here, is thought of as seeking the model there.

(Coomaraswamy, 1997: xvii)

Hence, the objective of transforming such a performance space is to restore a model similar to the *Chit-Sabha* space, where once again seeking for the Absolute is visually enhanced. In such an undertaking, the space is transformed to enhance the engagement of the dancer and the audience and, thereby, enrich the performance experience.
Conclusion

Space is considered ever present: before any work of art is created, during the creation, and after the created work is completed. However, I have argued that space does not only contain form, rather its importance is in creating transformation to be experienced by the participants or the observer.

Therefore, space transformation as I have discussed, is not necessarily concerned with the literal creation of space that was there before. It is about creating an “inner space”, the ‘dwelling place of the Gods.’ It is this concept of space transformation that is regarded as significant to ideas of enhancing performance space in Indian dance.

In order to emphasise these concepts, the chapter discussed how ancient spaces, such as the caves and temples, were designed to enhance artistic creations and, thereby, the observers and participants’ experiences. I argued that by understanding the various components of space, an ethereal experience of space could be created.

Nonetheless, the objective of the chapter was to recapture similar experiencing of space that is found in traditional space. This was argued in relation to creating or transforming space in contemporary and modern theatre spaces. This discussion was crucial, as I have shown how by symbolically transforming performance space, the performance experience is enhanced aesthetically. The chapter also argued that by integrating design elements in Indian dance performance, the performer’s interaction with the space becomes crucial, as this permits the performer to experience space and its interrelating concepts which were there before, visually. Through this visual presentation that potentially enhances the space and the performer’s experiences, the
variously transformed spaces within the theatre, stimulate the viewers’ experiences too.

The ultimate aim of the chapter, as I have argued, lies in the inherent importance and role of design in transforming the space that seeks for spiritual union. Further, it extends to evoke space transformation as a unique experience, and which in contemplation becomes a temple, a divine abode, presented aesthetically. Potentially transforming a performance space, therefore, is able to create dance that interacts with the designed spaces, and produce enhanced performance experiences as a spiritual journey.
CHAPTER 4: CHOREOGRAPHY

Introduction

The previous two chapters attempted to demonstrate how the form and the formless are conceived and how space transformation affects our perception. Indeed, the discussion underlined how form and space merge, divide and multiply their content to create another meaning and, thus, integrate aesthetics to be seen and experienced by the beholder. To reemphasize this point, I wish to highlight here the unique characteristics that are found in the interrelationship of form and space.

This is necessary because the quest for aesthetic and sociological reasons for the necessity of enhancing the theatrical experiences could easily be taken to be merely the process of experimentation in visual language. However, as I intend to show here, the quest to enhance the theatre experience has been continually undertaken by many reputable artists in the attempt to conceptualize the various personification of Indian dance theatre. To address such notions, it is necessary to reinstate the ideology of space and form that I believe governs the creative aspects of works of art.

Therefore, I would stress here that space and form are two components that complement one another. When space is occupied with a form, it is altered or changed. When form occupies space, it creates another form in relation to the whole space. When these two components merge, it creates a third component: space-form-time. The third component, time, as I envisage, denotes motion, which is equated with our body and the cosmos. In everyday life, different parts of our body move voluntarily or involuntarily. Therefore, every movement of the body is subject to the space it encounters within a specific time. When this occurs, the body is in motion in space.
As a dancer, I consider the body to be a form in motion. When the dance body moves in space, various forms are created. When various forms are created, the body interacts to these forms. The body-form, therefore, as movement in space, is governed by time. Thus, movement creates union between time and space, in a given time-space. Adrian C. Moulyn expresses this cohesiveness as:

Space, time and movement are an indissoluble triumvirate. Movement interconnects time with space intimately. Instead of separating time from space, or space from time, movement provides their coherence, since it occurs in timespace.

(Moulyn, 1991:12)

This unification of body and space as movement in time also takes place in our everyday life. The body occupies the space and the body manoeuvres along the various spaces. Such movement creates various shapes and patterns in space. The everyday movements may not seem to be a creation, but when such movements are organized to convey meanings, it becomes an art of choreography. What is this art of choreography and what does it constitute in the context of Indian dance?

To relate these questions in this chapter, the discussion on the art of choreography will also include reflections on other forms in space that can enhance a performance. In particular, I will discuss the interaction between ‘choreography’ and ‘design’ elements. I shall argue that these two elements can be important components for understanding and experiencing Indian dance. The chapter, therefore, aims to explain the role of design and choreography as part of Indian dance tradition, where the design with dance is approached as an extended aesthetic expression of the body. This is to highlight the richness of Indian visual arts and their relationship to the performing arts. It is this factor of enhancing the experiences of performances,
regardless of their attribution towards the performer or the audience, which delineates the ultimate purpose of my argument.

As part of my research, I have used a self-reflexive approach to advance the intellectual rigour of this personally meaningful research. This approach allows for self-examination and increases the capacity to promote effective and appropriate cross-cultural communication in the context of intellectual research.

As a performer, I use my own experiences and the self-reflexive approach to ask, how can forms and spaces as feelings, be extended out and be experienced in a performance space? Is choreography only subjected to body movements or does it also include any space manipulation by other forms? These are some of the questions that I shall attempt to answer as I position the reader within the scope of understanding Indian dance traditions / performances in contemporary performance space.

Nevertheless, before I address these questions, I must highlight the understanding that the organic form of choreography, defined in terms of the individual body, has been the traditional understanding and technical presentation of dance. However, I wish to argue that the organic form can be expressed through other mediums to expand beyond the body itself. This allows us to illustrate that space is not only confined within the dancer as the choreographed body, but it is also derived from external compositional elements. Therefore, I contend that it is space that defines choreography, rather than the body itself. As Veenapani Chawla says:

Space, its arrangement in relation to the performer and inversely the arrangement of the performer’s behavior in relation to space, so as to convey significance, is what choreography is all about.[…] There is a sense of inner psychological space of the performer, the external ‘real’ space, which [the
performer] shares with the audience and a larger cosmic space. [...] And arranging for the performer to relate these spaces in a meaningful way for a shared experience with the audience is the essence of choreography.

(Chawla, 2001:51)

To address the several issues / queries that I have identified, the chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I will briefly discuss dance as a preface to expressing choreography. In the second section, I will proceed to define the art of choreography. This will allow us to see how the term ‘choreography’ was derived and how it is perceived in the east and the west in a comparative manner. In the third section, I will discuss on the history of choreography, both of West and East. Following this section, I will then analyse the choreographic works of three great artists: Uday Shankar, Rukmini Devi, and Chandralekha. In my opinion, each of these artists have contributed to the development of Indian dance in their unique ways. Shankar, who was trained in various Indian classical and folk dance forms, is considered the father of modern Indian dance. On the other hand, Rukmini is considered to have revived the art of bharatanatyam. Chandralekha, who was trained in bhartanatayam style, is classified as a controversial dancer who created contemporary choreographic works that go beyond the norm of bharatanatyam.

Indeed, it is important to me that their respective classification by scholars, as ‘father of modern dance’, ‘revivalist’ and ‘controversialist’, will allow studying their differences and their similarities (if there are any). Ultimately, my purpose is to examine how they have expressed their dance creations and how their works were influenced by the tradition of Indian dance techniques.

Nevertheless, to understand the art of creating an idea in dance, we have to first understand the basics of the craft and study how it can be applied in multiple ways to
enhance performance experience. The following short introduction to the art of choreography will allow me to define and present my understanding of its concepts.

**Expressing Choreography**

In the world of dance, the term choreography has been used in many ways. In fact, many dance practitioners and scholars have discussed the notion of choreography. In recent years, choreography has become a challenging subject; as the themes, the presentations, the influences (old and new) continue to expand the art further to reach out to wider audiences. Nonetheless, before defining choreography, I wish to review briefly the subject of dance. This will position the argument on how the term “choreography” came to be used in the subject of dance.

Arguably, Dance generally refers to the body movements in response to certain feelings. It is a mode of human expression. This expression can be said to be presented for the purpose of spiritual, social, entertainment or communication.

However, movement as an expression can be derived from many sources and presented in many ways. Movement becomes dance when the body in motion becomes the main subject of an expression and communicates certain ideas. The body moves in a choreographed form creating patterns, lines and shapes in space, which is different from everyday experience of movement. Movement in dance therefore, is presented as symbolic expressions in space. Thus, movement is similar to that argued by Kapila Vatsyayan. She states that “movement is not restricted to the articulation of limbs of the physical body” alone, but is also related to “[body’s] relationship with space outside” (Vatsyayan, 1997: 4).
These daily encounters affect our emotions and we express them in different ways. Artists, such as painters and sculptors, use various mediums to express these experienced forms as movements in their work. On the other hand, dancers use their bodies as the medium to extend these expressions in space.

In ancient India, dance was used to express nature’s beauty and it was conceived as a divine form. It became part of rituals, ceremonies and celebrations. Hence, it is noted, that,

> At the dawn of human history when primitive man was still a hunter, he tried to win the favour of natural powers, for which he invented some magical spells. Since such spell had some ritual dances and enactment as its parts, he significantly dressed himself in masks, wrapped himself in animal skin and accompanied by primitive musical instruments impersonated another being for performing the rite. Each member of the community was an active participant and equally involved in the ceremony.

(Iravati, 2003: 9 -10)

Similarly, Thomas Poplawski argues that in the West dance as ritual form was contained within a village and the audience was also part of the participants (Poplawski, 1998). For example, in ancient Greece, the dance of the *dithyramb* or *circular dance*, as ritual celebrations, was performed by the “entire village. Villagers gathered around a central altar”, sung and danced in rhythm, moved in one direction and repeated the same in reverse direction (ibid 14-15). This form of movement indicates that these were organised rhythmic patterns of movements. Even though the movements were organised, their purpose was never perceived as an art form. Therefore, I would argue that the purpose of such rituals was to be in communion with the ceremony and other members, rather than a form of artistic expression or communication.
Interestingly, this form of ritualistic gestures as movement became a crucial communicative medium in Indian classical dance. Indeed, as the ‘main embodiment of all arts’, the temple contributed significantly to the ritualistic elements that are found in Indian dance traditions (Gaston, 1996). These stylized movements and ritual recitations were also closely related to the Vedas. In fact, the temple priest was seen foremost as the person who initiated the ritualistic movements, some of which movements have become part of the Indian classical dance forms (ibid).

To continue the tradition and sustain the rituals within the temples, servants of Gods known as devadasis were instituted. They danced as a form of symbolic expression, which constantly focused on religious concepts and ‘incorporated the elements of bhakti / devotion’ (ibid). According to Pran Nevile, devadasis were considered to be well versed in temple rituals, performed dance as prayer and were devoted to temple festivals (Nevile, 1996).

The temple-dance which was revived before it was about to be totally abolished in the 19th century during the British colonization, re-emerged in the 1930’s. Its revivers were interested in the aesthetic beauty of the dance form and nationalism. Ritual forms and the spiritual elements in the pre-revived Indian dance were restructured to enhance the dance into a beautiful art form. Subsequently, the aesthetic forms were systematized as dance movements, and became part of the tradition and were passed on from one generation to the next. This enriched transition of Guru-shishya that is from teacher to disciple has been the practice of inculcating knowledge of the traditional arts forms in India (Schwartz, 2004).

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1 It is stated that the creation of Indian dance was formulated from the four Vedas: the recitation from the Rig-Veda; the music from Sama-Veda; gestures representation from Yajur-Veda and the sentiments from the Atharva-Veda. These were then combined to form the Natya-Veda or what is popularly known as Natyasastra, where visual and auditory expressions are simultaneously presented (The Natyasastra of Bharatamuni / translated into English by Board of Scholars, 1996).

2 The pre-revived Indian dance was known as sadir.
However, in the history of dance, the mode of expressing a form has changed dramatically. The inner dimensions of the dance and the dancer were developed in different ways to communicate to audiences. Dance, previously recognized simply as mode of expression and communication was developed into the “art of choreography” to convey the meanings found within the dancer and from his / her communion with the world. The subjects of ritual and devotion were modified to include contemporary meanings to the themes depicted. Such idea in Indian dance choreography argues Khokar “has a long history of cross-pollination with Western ideas of choreography” (Mattson, 2001:155). I contend that these cross-referencing and changes brought forward the dance as an expressional art form to be communicated and experienced by wider audiences.

2b. Defining Choreography

The term “choreography” is believed to be derived from the Greek word, “khoreia”, which means dance and “graphie,” which denotes the art of writing or drawing. Thus, it can be said that choreography is the art of writing down dance as notations that can be rearranged and organized for a performance. However, choreography is also regarded as a way of using the body to create sequences and patterns of movements that can be seen as drawings in space.

This way of seeing and reading movement, possibly came from the idea of creating theatre space in a raised amphitheatre. In Greek theatre, “tiers of seats were built” along the surrounding natural mounds and from there the “spectators could look down on the performances” (Arnott, 1989: 3) from a distance. In fact, complex patterns of

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3 Simpson and Weiner. The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989. Here choreography also denotes the art of writing “notation for dance.”
4 Pearsall, Judy. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1999. It is interesting to note that the Greek word khoreia, refers not only to dancing but also to “dancing in unison”, from the word khorus “chorus.”
movements, such as the movements of waves and movements of warriors, were all created with large number of dancers on the performance space (Arnott, 1989). This was done to create spectacular effects that could be read clearly and translated as visual ‘pattern of words’ (ibid).

This clearly indicates how dance creations were conceived as drawings in space from a visual perspective. The viewers “read” the movements from afar and above. Hence, I argue that idea of choreography in this case was to visually present the dance as a creation of ‘text movements’, readily perceptible.

Nevertheless, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term choreography began to include other meanings. It was perceived in a much more sophisticated manner and used as a term to express the diverse range of creativity in the dance space. In the nineteenth century, choreography was used to signify the creation of fresh movements by combining movements that already existed (Van Praagh and Brinson, 1963: 3). In reference to this definition, James K. Feibleman’s suggest that the term choreography also refers to the composed movements that are planned and allow for “imitation or repetition” (Feibleman, 1949: 49).

I would therefore argue that the art of choreography is not only about the creation of steps or new movements, but also the re-establishing of older patterns. This is to say that a choreographic work could comprise of old movements, new movements or a combination of both that allows for further development. Does this mean that choreography consists only of bodily movements?

In fact, in the West, the art of choreography was not only meant to be an expression of the dancer’s body. Even in the Greek period, according to Peter D. Arnott,
choreography also included the art of choral singing that accompanied the dancers (Arnott, 1989: 27). Further, Arnott argued that the whole idea of Greek theatre choreography was due to its “unique combination of dance, music and the spoken word” (ibid). According to Roger Copeland, theatrical choreography also “incorporates the full panoply of theatrical resources (décor, costume, lighting)” (Copeland, 1985: 174). This becomes and additive to the choreography of dance movements as well (ibid).

These combinations were seen as an important component of choreography and design that was further developed in twentieth century. The art of choreography with dance and music was further developed to include the creation of dance sceneries, props, lighting effects and costumes (Van Praagh and Brinson, 1963). These were considered as tools for the choreographer to communicate the themes of the dance, especially in the production of ballets (ibid: 3). Over the years, modern digital technology has also played major roles in the art of choreography (Giannachi, 2004).

However, the term ‘choreography’ is a very recent addition to terms in Indian dance. In South India, dance creations were known in Tamil as “Nadanam Ameipu.” This can be translated to mean the art of making dance, dance arrangement or dance composition based on the traditional codified expressions and gesture. In order to be true to its traditions, new movements were never considered. The form was strictly based on the treatise of Natyasastra and the Abhinaya Darpana, and the themes of the dances were based on mythological and legendary stories.

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5Srimathi Kamakshi Jayaraman, my dance Guru explained the word Nadanam Ameipu. She elaborated that during her years of learning Indian dance, the dance items were fixed and arranged by the Guru. Every conceivable idea (music and dance) came from the Guru, and the students were told to imitate exactly the movements and learn the music. This she expressed as the “making of the dance” with what was already there in tradition.
Ashish Mohan Khokar, a dance historian and critic, argued that the creation of Indian dance began long ago, but was never termed as “choreography” (Khokar, 2001: 4). The making of dance then, was termed as “composition” and it was used as a “keyword in the context of Indian dance traditions” (ibid). This was also similarly proposed by Vatsyayan, who noted that the technique of dance creation mentioned in *Natyasastra* is seen as the “sphere [or subject] of dance composition” (Vatsyayan, 1977: 30).

In fact, the subject of Indian dance, which is profoundly embedded in the ancient Indian dance treatise, is used as a reference guide to produce a combination of dance movements. These movements were well illustrated and permitted the dancers to imitate and repeat the described movements. Moreover, Indian classical dance essentially constitutes two aspects of movements. One aspect is expressed by the art of “*nritta*” (pure dance), which demonstrates the geometry of the body. The other aspect is expressed by “*abhinaya*” (gestures) that are used to convey emotions or suggestive meanings (Vatsyayan, 1977: 17).

Hence, I would argue that the components of *nritta* and *abhinaya* are effectively seen as the ‘compositional elements’ that bind the respective Indian dance forms. The *nritta* and *abhinaya* modes are therefore used as techniques of representations to communicate intended meanings to the audiences.

Such methods of dance composition, I argue, define every conceivable idea and expression that is found within the Indian classical dance. The term ‘dance composition’, as referred by Ashish Khokar, is an appropriate expression that defines the art of creating Indian dance. Shanta Dananjayan equally argues that Indian dance
is better expressed as composition when performed as a solo dance (The Hindu, 2002). Regardless of its presentation, to the Indian dance practitioners, choreography is a separate art form in itself and can never be equated to the quintessence of Indian dance composition (Govind, 2001). Furthermore, the term composition, which means the combination of various elements, parts or ingredients, ideally describes the various shades of expression in Indian dance (Vatsyayan, 1977:32). It is said that “from a smallest unit of movement into a composite whole”, Indian dance is able to evoke the intended emotions (ibid). Indian dance composition therefore, is considered as an expressive dance that stimulates rasa (Govind, 2001:15). This suggests that Indian dance composition is not only focused on movements, but it also emphasise the idea of aesthetic delight in every manner of presenting the dance.

As I noted earlier, the term ‘choreography’ is a Western derivative, intended to emphahise on the external extravagant forms (Van Praagh and Brinson, 1963). However, Indian dance, which is popularly known as ‘visual poetry’, differs in the way that it is experienced by the performer and the audience. It is threaded with many inner layers of emotions and expressions that ought to been seen and experienced by being close to the performer. This seeing and experiencing changes considerably when the art form is performed in modern theatre spaces, where the audience is distant from the performer. In such instances, the conceptualization of Indian dance choreography is also affected; nevertheless, it retains the inner dimensions of traditions (Nakra 2003: 154).

Therefore, I argue that in Indian dance, the art of choreography is not about experiencing the performance as an external form alone, but its choreography is enveloped with multitude of meanings in space that is unraveled during the dance. It
is the suggestive expressional journey that creates this experience. As such, the word ‘choreography’ in the context of Indian dance can be considered as the art of creating a “total vision” by the use of various expressive modes. This vision when expressed in theatre space is then experienced by the audience. Therefore, in creating a performance, the whole theatre space is potentially treated as choreographic expression, where different representational forms and moods are created by the use of various theatrical mediums. These techniques thus become an important tool in communicating the vision. According to Kapila Vatsyayan:

All Indian arts creates an illusion of spontaneity which, when examined carefully, is the result of the perfect and flawless execution of multiple and complex systems of technique. The technique becomes especially significant because it is the vital vehicle of a profound vision which the artist has known and which he is seeking to suggest through his particular medium with the greatest possible concentration of rhythmic [and choreographic] unity.  

(Vatsyayan, 1977: 20-21)

However, in my view, recreating a vision in theatre suggest the idea of “designing movement” in space. Every design that is expressed in theatre can be visualized as energy in space. When manipulated, this energy becomes movement. Therefore, choreography that encases the idea of design as extension of energy in space is perceived as part of performance experience. The various design mediums used in choreography including the body, create patterns, forms, and shapes that occupy the performance space. In a similar thought, Chandralekha, dancer turned choreographer, says that,

...choreography is the science of organizing movement in space. It is based on specific principles of the unity of space and time. In fact, not merely the principle, but the dynamics of space/time in the context of the human body in motion are involved. It is almost like sculpting space with movement.  

(Chandralekha, 2001: 66)
The idea of “sculpting space” can also be interpreted to include the ideas of designs that shape the form in performance space. To argue this point, I will use the examples in Image 1, 2 and 3 to illustrate how dance and design can effectively create ‘sculpturing’ in performance space. Through this application, different forms in space are created.

The diagrams show the various forms that are created in space by introducing various theatrical mediums treated as symbolic designs. These are established at various stages during a performance. In Image 1, the dancer executes specific movements and freezes into a pose. In doing so, the dancer uses the body to “sculpt” the space as he/she moves their body to create the intended pose.
To emphasize certain meanings, Image 2 shows how the dancer’s pose can be related to a specific symbol. In this case a yantra / mystic diagram as the background image. This symbolic image creates an effect of “sculpturing” the dance space. To further express the aesthetic beauty within the dance, Image 3 demonstrates how lighting design can be introduced to create pyramid form to develop the dance expressions. The lighting effect also creates the idea of “sculpturing” space. The body, the symbol yantra and the lighting effect are all perceived as sculpturing the space in different layers during the dance. As a dancer, I see the interrelationship of these forms in space as an individual suggestive form that ultimately unites to create a total aesthetic form. The background, the lighting and the dance body amalgamates as a single magnified form that is perceived and expressed as choreographed “sculpture” for contemplation.

Thus, the sculpturing of the performance space is conceived as a process of choreography. Each phase of sculpturing the space creates various forms at various space-times. Sculpturing of space in this manner enhances the performance experience and produces various symbolic forms in a precise choreographed manner. Such concepts of sculpturing forms as a technique of choreography, says Chandralekha,

By “sculpting space” I mean that one sees the human body not in itself or by itself, unrelated in space like some flat figure, but as a specific mass in relation to a specific volume. So even the space not occupied by the body or displaced by it has precise volume and formal content, which can be read as clearly as the body movement itself... While choreographing, one is conscious to sculpt space as precisely as one sculpts the form.

( ibid: 66)

In my opinion, such expression by Chandralekha can also be applied to the art of choreography that encompasses design mediums too. This can be considered as “sculpting” the space as movement. In such process, the choreography creates various
forms that can be read as aesthetic patterns or images, evoking \textit{rasa} in the observer. They are forms in performance space which are integrated with the dance.

I would argue that choreography as a sculpturing art, expresses a “vision” that is also seen as “design in space.” These two components can be considered as the two faces of a coin. Together and separately they create the “whole.” Therefore the art of Natya/performance is not only restricted to one particular medium, rather it embraces all other arts too. This is clearly indicated by Bharata in that every art form presented should act as a “vehicle of a greater purpose and [has] a function to perform beyond itself” (Vatsyayan, 1977: 9). Thus, the idea of integrating design within Indian dance is to seek for that which is beyond its own function. However, the most important integrating aspect of aesthetics, as argued by Vatsyayan in reference to the \textit{Natyasastra}, is its ability to produce “\textit{rasa}” in the audiences (ibid: 8). This can be achieved by way of implementing various techniques of creative expressions in a performance space (ibid).

In my opinion, such creative expression in theatre cannot be confined to the dancer’s body alone. The design elements thus, should also be considered as an expression in space. Therefore, as I have argued earlier, “space itself defines choreography.”

In defining choreography as the integration of design, which also includes the dancer’s body, it is to present or reveal a total image that the audience experiences. In that manner, choreography in a theatre space could encompass the whole performance space as a huge canvas. In creating such choreographic presentation, the perspective of choreography to the proscenium theatre is crucial too. This perspective not only highlights the dancer’s body, but also demonstrates how other theatrical mediums are presented and choreographed within the performance space. Indeed, Mamata Niyogi-
Nakra, a choreographer and scholar argues that such an attempt emphasise the idea of creating dance as “choreographic panorama” (Nakra, 2003: 152). To her, the emotions in Indian dance can be expressed through patterns in space that also include the whole theatre and performance space (ibid).

Choreography, in that manner, generates ‘a new seeing.’ It produces the representation of other art forms that can be ‘read’ and experienced together with the dancer’s body. The dancer therefore is not isolated by the process, but engages with various mediums that creates “choreographic panorama.” The idea of choreography in this manner can be termed as dance composition, which includes various ingredients. Arguably, the various theatrical mediums introduced in theatre are potentially presented as “sculpting space” (Chandralekha, 2001: 66). In that, design and dance in the dynamics of space / time is treated as “sculpting space with movement” (ibid).

Within the context of Indian dance, Chandralekha argues that there is no proper word in the Indian text that expresses the art of creating Indian dance (Chandralekha, 2001: 66). However, the term “composition” as argued by Khokar (Khokar, 2001: 4) appropriately denotes the creation of Indian dance as an art of expressing a vision too.

Indeed, in the context of Indian dance, choreography is seen as a communicative medium. The important aspect is to use every conceivable idea that will enable the intended concepts to be expressed. Therefore, to define choreography is to define the art of Indian aesthetics regardless of the medium used. This initiates a substance, a form, a structural component that ultimately transcends the performance (Ratnam, 2001: 8). In such approach, the choreography “heighten[s] ambience and effectively transmit[s] the underlying message of choreographic work” (Nakra, 2003: 152).
Whether the creation of Indian dance is termed as composition or choreography, Indian dance has been influenced by western ideas too ((Mattson, 2001:155). The important point here is to emphasise how the inner dimensions of the Indian and Western theatrical forms can be utilized to express the intended vision. However, the essence of such integration ought to develop the idea of aesthetic *rasa*, which can also sprout the idea of “divine” in Indian dance creation.

Nonetheless, Indian dance creation has come a long way; from the time of its historical conception to the time of revival and further to the time of new developments and innovative grounds. A short review on the history of choreography will allow for a better understanding of the influences and developments in Indian and Western choreography.

**History of Choreography in the West and the East**

Many of the dance forms that I have mentioned earlier in this chapter were originally dances that expressed the divine. For example, in the West, dance in earlier times was perceived as something impressive beyond the body and was natured towards the essence of spirituality (Poplawski, 1998). According to Rudolf Steiner,

> Dance is an independent rhythm, a movement whose centre is outside of the human being. The rhythm of dance takes us to a primeval age of the world. The dances of our time are a degeneration of the original temple dances that embodied knowledge of the most profound secrets of the world.

(Steiner in Poplawski, 1998: 9)

Thomas Poplawski argues that the classical western dance later degenerated to be “grandiose” and “empty showmanship” (Poplawski, 1998: 18). He further states that
the art form, which was originally a means of spiritual connections, became more concerned with “accentuating the technical brilliance” (ibid).

Indeed, in the fifteenth century classical Western ballet was seen as a way of executing technical virtuosity and aesthetic beauty. It soon became the art of creating a theme with a choreographic expression. For example, in the history of classical ballet, dance was choreographed to relate closely with the themes of the functions that were held in the royal courts. This happened during the fifteen and sixteenth centuries. Later, when classical ballet was performed in public halls, where the audiences were seated high in galleries, the choreography emphasized complex floor patterns. This was created as various lines of movement by presenting group dancers, as compared to movement by a solo ballet dancer.

The shift from royal courts to public halls also saw changes in the way the entire dance was presented. The first development of proscenium theatre in France during the mid-1600s, also gave rise to rich and elaborate sets, costumes, scenery and stage effects in dance performances. Subsequently, when dance was introduced as a professional art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the subject of choreography changed. New theatrical forms were created as opera-ballets. These ballets emphasized the importance of singing and dancing. The choreographic themes were closely related to stories that captured the legend of geographical lands and their people.

Subsequently, classical ballet produced numerous works of pantomime presentation that saw the emergence of classic stories that are still performed today. Examples of these choreographed classic dances are *Swan Lake*, *Coppelia*, *Giselle* and *La Syphide*. 
All these works of classical ballet were continuously enriched by elaborate stagecrafts. This was intended as visual presentations that depict the dance themes.

With the development of classical ballet as a professional art, many dance companies were formed. The professional dance companies not only choreographed dance based on classic stories, but also created works that emerged from music, paintings, sculptures and other forms of inspiration. Various works of abstract themes and forms were introduced and developed.

However, in the context of classical Indian dance, these inspirations seem to differ. The repertoires of the bharatanatyam classical dance styles, developed by the four Tanjore Quartet brothers, Chinnaya, Ponniah, Shivanandam and Vadivelu, were considered a temple art form (Gaston, 1996: 146). The composition of repertoires stayed for a long time, and only in the twentieth century during the revival were there any changes. The revival of bharatanatyam in the 1930s, argues Matthew Harp Allen, was conceived as a “reconstruction” (Allen, 1997: 63). Hence, from this time onwards, the classical dance also summoned the “alteration and replacement of dance repertoires and choreography” (ibid).

Nonetheless, the theme and the presentation of the choreography remained similar during the peak of classic years (Kothari et al., 2003: 11). In referring to this classification, Sunil Kothari says:

In the 1960’s, ‘70s and ‘80s, the popularity of classical dance forms reached its peak. […] What is common to all these classical dances is that their roots are in religion, and mythological and devotional stories form their content. The expressional aspect tends to revolve around a nayika, the heroine, who pines for union with nayaka, the hero. The heroine symbolizes the soul of a

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6 Famous dance companies that are always considered prestigious, include the Bolshoi Ballet Company, the Kirov Ballet Company, School of American Ballet, the Royal Ballet School in London, and the Rambert School of Ballet, which is also in London. Today, most countries have at least one ballet school and company.
devotee, and the hero, the Lord, the super-soul with whom the soul wishes to unite.

(ibid)

According to Kumudini Lakhia, choreography in Indian classical dance was introduced to reach or close the gap between the contemporary performer and the audiences (Lakhia, 2001: 9). She argues that classical forms, such as Kathak, need to embrace the societal changes that are taking place (ibid). Lakhia, further argues that new approaches, new content and new way of communicating artistic ideas needed to be explored and implemented to fuse with the modern world (ibid: 9-10).

Indeed, in referring to books, such as *New Directions in Indian Dance*, edited by Sunil Kothari and *Attendance: The Dance Annual of India*, edited by Ashish Khokar, one observes how over the past centuries and in the present, Indian dance choreography has changed tremendously. In my opinion, the reason for such developments is to express and to communicate the creator’s ideas and thematic concepts effectively to the audiences. This also means that the development of choreography in Indian dance allows for new creative works that explore new directions. However, Kothari, Khokar and the other authors in the two books, constantly argue that the new development should not blur the Indian dance. Its growth should always reflect the essence of Indian aesthetics (Kothari et al., 2003, Khokar, 2001).

In referring to Western choreography, new approaches were already developed during the early twentieth century. From merely looking at classical ballet as “the form”, modern and contemporary dances were also created. Modern pioneering artists, such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, moved away from classical ballet to create new contemporary approaches (Morgenroth, 2004). Their choreographic
techniques were based on the tendency of the body to extend abstract movements in space. Their ability to understand motion in space produced new ideas and created dance that magnified the sense of space through their innovative works (ibid).

However, Eastern schools of beliefs also influenced the development of modern dance in the West. Western choreographers started exploring the use of other art forms, such as “visual arts”, “technology” and “philosophy”, to create innovative ideas in dance movement and explore their integration in the entire performance (ibid: 5-6).

Indeed, choreographers like Merce Cunningham explored the performance space very differently from many other modern dance choreographers. Motivated by Albert Einstein’s theory that “there are no fixed points in space”, Cunningham shaped his choreography to envelope the different things happening at the same time in his performances (ibid: 15). He also collaborated with music composers, such as John Cage, to develop sound and movement that resonated with the philosophical ideas of Zen Buddhism (ibid: 6). Why is there a need to do so?

Alexander Alland argues that in the modern Western theatre, choreographers used various techniques to recapture the essence of theatre, which he believed was initially conceived as a ritualistic theatre (Alland, 1977: 16). He further argues that artists like Cunningham also used techniques that he found were able to “re-establish a ritual like connection between the audience and the performers” (ibid). Thus, by employing various techniques, modern choreography presented dance as a symbolic representation too. This manner of representation, argues Alland, brings the audiences closer and permits the audience to become engaged with the dance (ibid).
In my opinion, such contemporary approaches to choreography also influenced the way Indian dance was presented. Many dancers and choreographers, who have been trained in Indian dance forms, also explored traditional art in a contemporary and modern way. This enabled the sacred art to become more secular and reach out to wider and modern audiences.

In the history of choreography in Indian dance, the contemporary approaches were fast incorporated into the classical form. Dancers / choreographers, such as Anita Ratnam, Kumudini Lakhia, Navtej Johar, Mrinalini Sarabhai and Uttara Asha Coorlawala, who were trained in India classical dance styles, approached and undertook choreography in a contemporary and modern way (Kothari et al., 2003, 1995; Khokar, 2001). For example, the traditional repertoire of bharatanatyam performances was replaced with contemporary stories and used modern methods to develop various ideas (ibid).

Such approaches, according to Coorlawala, suggest that there is a need to infuse Indian dance creativity with new ideas, so as to seek for new waves of “paradigms perception” (Coorlawala, 2003: 176). This seeking for new concepts in my view is to rediscover the tradition through new way of creative presentation. For modern choreographers like Coorlawala, the idea of integrating the classical Indian forms with modern dance constitutes an assimilation of aesthetics that is possible to sprout new experiences within the performance (Coorlawala, 2001: 56).

Indeed, choreography throughout Indian dance history emphasise the idea of creating aesthetic experiences in the performer and the audience. The following sections, discusses how various choreographic approaches by leading Indian dancers affected the performance experiences.
Studying their creative advances will enable us to discover how Indian dance performance has been further developed. This study will also examine how innovative ideas, which I consider crucial, lifted the Indian dance traditions to another level. I will show how these choreographers by integrating various theatrical mediums, not only enhanced performance experiences, but also reinforced Indian theatrical practice, aesthetics and philosophy.

Dance creations by these artists also affected many subsequent artists. The techniques and artistic presentations also generated interest in scholars who argue that these creative works pushed / extended the Indian dance to another genre. Their creative idea is what interests me to rediscover the purpose of their unique enrichments in Indian dance choreography. Their approaches to create Indian dance performances have considerably effected the way Indian dance is presented and experienced today.

**Artistic creations by UDAY SHANKAR**

There are many dancers and choreographers in India who have contributed to the enrichment of Indian dance. Some have focused on dance expression by the body, while others have integrated recitation of text and sounds into their choreography. There are also some who have endeavoured to incorporate other theatrical mediums into the Indian dance arena. All these form of expressions portray either mythological themes or contemporary stories that allow us to engage with the ancient philosophical time and with the present space-time.

In the case of Uday Shankar, he is said to be the pioneer of Indian modern dance. He is well known for introducing Indian dance ballets to the Western world. In my opinion, Shankar’s understanding of arts (west and east), and especially, western
theatrical techniques, enabled him to present Indian dance effectively on the world stage. His background in painting and his knowledge in sculpture enabled him to bring a new wave and light into the field of Indian dance. While not initially trained as a dancer, in the 1920s, he performed the dance of Krishna and Radha with Anna Pavlova, the great ballerina. (Khokar, 1983) He had been requested by Pavlova to choreograph this particular dance piece. Shankar used his knowledge of forms acquired from his interest in fine arts to create movements that portrayed an expression of Indianess through the art of dance.

His early career in dance started in the West, where he was involved with Pavlova and her dance company. Subsequently, he returned to India to study the richness of Indian traditional and folk dances. He was affected by the great mysteries of the ancient Indian art and immediately connected with its beauty and elegance (Erdman, 1998: 80-83; Hall, 1984: 332).

Having mastered the various dance styles of India, Shankar began to create new dance movements. In his dance productions, elements of visual in the form of lighting, sound, projections and grand costumes were used to express the various modes in his performance theme. These mediums of expressions were intertwined in the dance choreography to portray classical, as well as abstract visual and auditory theatre components. This significantly contributed to Indian dance concepts and presentation.
Shankar was especially interested in presenting his dance in a manner he thought would appropriately project the essence of Indianness. Seeing his dance production images, such as Image 4 (*Ram Leela*), one may question the intention Uday had when creating such performances. However, as the title suggests, the theme of the production is based on the story of Ramayana. According to Projesh Banerji and Fernau Hall, Shankar expanded the idea that he had conceived from seeing Indian shadow puppetry into his dance performance of *Ram Leela* (Banerji, 1982: 96-97, Hall, 1984: 336). Hall describes Shankar's interest in creating illusions of different dimensions in dance thus:

> Breaking away from the use of flat, translucent puppets, Uday Shankar used his dancers, moving them about in the area between lamp and screen, their three-dimensional bodies produced fascinating silhouettes on screen. Shankar had them move toward the lamp and away from it, thus making the shadow change in size and adding to the supernatural effect. He also used the superimposition of one shadow upon another and of shapes to suggest scenery.

(Hall, 1984: 337)

Banerji argues that by creating production such as *Ram Leela* that is close to the hearts of the Indian people, Shankar was able to uplift the performance experiences. He did this by presenting it as a dynamic shadow play (Banerji, 1982: 96). Indeed,
Banerji considers the shadowy movements as inducing innovative ethereal images that captivated and brought a “new type of joy” to the audiences’ mind (ibid).

To many scholars, Shankar’s dance creations produced different meanings, depending upon their perspective and interpretation. Indian cultural historian and scholar, Joan L. Erdman, argues that the complex and elaborated Indian indigenous classical dance was rebuilt by inspired productions articulated by Uday Shankar. His was a ‘turning point’ in the elaboration of India’s ancient dance to the West (Erdman, 1986). She further argues that Shankar portrayed Indian dance in its utmost ‘authenticity’ and, thus, revitalized its traditions (Erdman, 1987: 64). Therefore, I argue that Shankar was able to bring forth the Indian dance to “another civilization and culture with ancient philosophical underpinnings and a capacity to communicate to contemporary audiences its ideals and discipline” (Erdman, 1986: 276).

Correspondingly, I would argue that the purpose of design in Indian dance choreography is to rejuvenate Indianness. In that way, it significantly integrates to communicate not only with the audiences, but also with the performers. Such an approach allows uninitiated audiences to first develop an understanding of the art form through enhanced visual elements. It absorbs the audiences to reflect on the created visual designs and space. Audiences’ experience this designs in the way it is executed and presented. In the case of Shankar’s innovations, such ideas were seen as his way of interpreting the theme of the performance in an effective manner.

According to Erdman, Shankar’s theatrical productions to the western audiences were described as “translations” (Erdman 1987: 65). In my view, the expression of performance as “translations” can mean be interpreted in two ways. First, it presents the idea of using different techniques, such as using language to translate meanings
that are accessible to the audience. Secondly, it can be conceived as translating ideas of the performance by integrating other mediums that enables the audience to visually experience the intended meanings.

However, Erdman argues that Shankar’s dance productions needed to be translated by the use of staging techniques. This will therefore engage the viewers, especially the Westerners. She further contended that this was done in order for the audiences to “understand and receive performance” that will create a “different performer-audience interaction” (ibid). In such a case, I am intrigued to question whether such “translation” only seeks for “presentation”, rather than “experiencing” the performance.

In my view, translating a performance for the sake of audiences may undermine the authenticity of the production. Traditional Indian dance forms when presented to the Western world, should not forgo the “essence” of the art just for the sake of presentation. To succeed, it is necessary that every theatrical element that is integrated within the dance forms should be well harmonized. Thus, the whole creation becomes a total experience instilled within Indian artistic concepts.

Nonetheless, such “performance as translation”, observed Alessandra Lopez comprises of “relocation, an interpretation and adaptation, a recreation, a transformation and a representation” (Lopez, 2005: 19). On the other hand, Janet O’Shea argues that the act of translation-by-explanation affects the dance presentation, especially when this art form is performed to the international audiences (O’Shea, 2003: 127).
In my opinion, such an act of translation should not overpower the dance content and its aesthetic essence. The ‘translation’, as such, should accommodate the traditions and enhance its values through well-executed techniques. As dance is considered a visual experience, the best method would be to translate the dance not only through mere textual explanation, but through concise and precise visual representations. This representation can be in various forms that express the meanings in dance. In this way, visual translations through dance and design can potentially engage the audience to better understand the dance. Moreover, by careful blending, the audience can then experience the dance in a total harmonized visual form. This amalgamation and creation, however, ought to be situated within the context of Indian dance tradition and that is what exactly Shankar did.

Indeed, in order to produce the symbolic presentation of Indianness, Shankar created artistic works in various mediums to engage the dancing body with designs within the dance. To capture his visualized dance forms in a deeper level, Shankar also used film as another medium to express concepts in his choreography. He did this in his only film-dance production of *Kalpana*.  

Image 5 - *Kalpana* – a dance film by Uday Shankar

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7 This film was made in 1947 and had been shown throughout the world in many conferences and festivals. Its creation I believe, was to define the subject of creative dance and innovative expressions in Indian dance performances that is highlighted in Uday Shankar’s dance production
Made as a film, “Kalpana” highlighted the authenticity of Indianness, but it is clear that Shankar also wanted the audience to experience the performance in different ways. His production continuously was engaging and presented the genius behind his creativity. The production of “Kalpana” was intended for the performers to engage in the creative innovations. It is also for the audience to experience the marvelous integration of visual design and dance at the same time. Thus, the performance experiences are potentially enhanced.

To a certain degree, my own analysis of Shankar’s production contradicts the opinions of Erdman, Lopez and O’Shea. Even though these scholars may have regarded Shankar’s performance as representation, a translation or even a reconstruction, it was also a means for Shankar to communicate a “vision” through visual forms. This vision created a sense of “true Indian beauty”, which Shankar had already mastered through his “experiences” with Indian sculpture and paintings. As Fernau Hall states, Shankar was a painter before taking on dance as his career and, often in his dance productions, he used every conceivable opportunity to express dance through various mediums (Banerji, 1982; Hall, 1984).

In creating his dance performances, Shankar never concentrated on the use of hand gestures, as was typically the case in Indian classical dance styles (Hall, 1984: 343). Shankar was more concerned with the manner in which the body moves as forms in space (ibid). In fact, Hall argues that Shankar “succeeded in telling his stories without any use of the Hasta-mudras employed in all Indian classical styles” (ibid). This observation, suggests to me that Shankar was much more interested in magnifying the

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8 I viewed the film “Kalpana” at the Indian Film Institute Archives, Pune, India in September 2004. Photographs, copyright granted by FIA, Pune, India.
dance forms by using “total body movement concepts”, so that the dance creations become larger than the use of hand gestures itself.

Such magnification as a creative force is able to extend dance and create different forms and energy in space, which can then be experienced by the performer and the audience. Thus, by magnifying certain concepts in dance, it generates a heightened performance experience.

Indeed, by combining visual design with dance, Shankar’s intention was to study how performances spaces could be transformed to elevate an experience. His remarkable play of light and shadow, image projection and sets obviously prompted the audience to engage in his creative expression. He did this by engaging audiences from all walks of life, creating ballets that were not only based on mythological stories, but also reflected the contemporary life (Gargi 1962: 195).

Even though Shankar created productions that were based on contemporary themes, he was also engrossed in bringing out the “authentic form” of Indian theatre. I argue that the authentic form of Indian theatre is not the physical presentation alone. It is to nature Indian dance theatre to project representational forms; so as to seek the audience’s communion with the idea expressed (the formless). The authentic form is the attribution to the divine and that is evident in Shankar’s production of “Kalpana.” His way of integrating lighting, sets and elaborate costumes speaks of his conscious efforts to engage with divine forms in performance.

Rosamond Gilder in her article, The New Theatre in India: An Impression (Gilder 1957) also argues on Shankars’ creative dance. As a theatre critic and historian, Gilder argues that the spirit of Indian dance styles and its associated arts were kept
alive by creative artists like Uday Shankar. For example, she notes that Shankar’s dance productions recaptured the essence of ‘temple’ and the ‘legendary world’ (Gilder, 1957: 201). She acknowledges that Indian dance, which portrays mysticisms, could be developed in the modern theatre space. For example, Shankar’s shadow play encompassed representations of forms similar to the concepts in traditional Indian dance (ibid: 202). By presenting such creative components within Indian dance and by “using traditional material”, Gilder essentially argues that the art has expanded into “a new choreographic treatment” with a “perfection of ensemble” that portrayed a high calibre of performance (ibid). Indeed, what Gilder acknowledges is that Uday Shankar no doubt used other mediums as innovative additions in his dance productions, he was also sensitive and respectful towards the traditions encased in Indian dance (ibid).

In fact, in Shankar’s dance productions, the religious themes were crucially important; dance for Shankar was the essence of “religious” experiences (Hall, 1984: 327). Therefore, I contend that the essence of the choreographic elements in the performances of Shankar is in the way the designs are integrated in dance to induce divine experiences. Further, I would emphasize that Shankar’s innovative ideas are clearly devoted towards “India and its ancient traditions.” To this, Fernau Hall argued that Uday Shankar was able to see the interconnections of “Indian religion and aesthetics”, thereby allowing him to be creative in enhancing the beauty of Indian dance and its arts (Hall, 1984: 331).

According to Shankar, when it was necessary to introduce design elements in his performances, he did and sought the high aesthetic effects (Banerji, 1982: 44). Indeed, Shankar warned that when doing this type of integration, everything must be
balanced and there should not be any interruption to the dance performances (ibid). The total effect should be well harmonized to evoke the intended experience (ibid).

Shankar’s production innovations were carefully studied to bring together various mediums that ultimately were presented to project the spirit of Indian aesthetics. Banerji states that,

Shankar took the help of the modern to understand and make others understand the ancient, he took the West to exhibit the East, he took the modern art of presentation to show the spirit of India. He did not believe in Westernising his creation, but he endeavoured to show the true India to West. He was a seeker of truth of beauty, whatever was beautiful to him was real.

(Banerji, 1982. 65)

As such, Shankar was able to amalgamate the various techniques with traditional practice in modern times and in modern theatre spaces. Evidently, Shankar’s capacity to produce innovative works was consolidated from the synthesis of various medium that he used in his dance productions (Erdman, 1998: 72).

Such works as choreographic art, argues Beate Gordon, projected Shankar’s style of dance presentations as purely new compositions using traditional Indian techniques (Gordon, 1995: 192). Therefore, I argue that the art of Indian dance can be further enhanced by treating dance choreography as an art of composition, where various mediums are blended together to produce uplifting experiences.

The art of choreography therefore, should not only be seen in terms of the dancer’s body language, but also in terms of using various components that permit the performance to be experienced as a whole. In the case of Uday Shankar, his ability to understand the dynamism of Indian sculptures opened new grounds to initiate stylized
movements in his dance (Banerji, 1982, Khokar, 1983). Further, his capacity to visualize the overall performance as being similar to that of a painting generated new choreographic themes, thus allowing him to enhance the performance experiences by integrating other mediums too (ibid).

**Innovation by RUKMINI DEVI**

One of the most eminent artists India has ever produced was the great legendary dancer-choreographer, Rukmini Devi. The beauty and the elegance of what we see today in the *Bharatanatyam* dance style is mainly due to her dedication to this art form.

Born in 1904, she was continuously surrounded by religious teachings at a very young age. This later influenced her love for the fine arts. Before submerging herself into the arena of the arts, she dedicated much of her time to the global activities of International Theosophical Society (Ohtani, 1991: 303). While travelling to many countries, especially to the West, she was exposed to various kinds of artistic works including opera, ballet, theatre, painting, sculpture and music (Kothari, 2004: 32).

During one such occasion, she had the opportunity to watch the great Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova, dance. Rukmini Devi was captivated by the sense of beauty in the dance. She was overwhelmed by how the entire production was presented. So affected was she that she commenced her dance training in Western Ballet under the tutelage of one of Pavlova’s students (Ohtani, 1991: 304).

However, Pavlova encouraged Rukmini Devi to pursue the inner beauty of Indian dance. Pavlova’s advice to Rukmini was, “you can learn ballet but I think everyone
must try to revive the art of his own country” (in ibid). This inspired Rukmini to revisit her own traditions. In fact, Rukmini’s interest in her own culture grew stronger when she saw the dance of sadir performed by two sisters (devadasis) at the Music Academy in Madras, India (Meduri, 2005: 201; Allen, 1997: 65). She was completely carried away by the essence of the dance, especially its inherent devotion and graceful beauty. Consequently, Rukmini began learning the Indian dance form (ibid).

I have intentionally addressed Rukmini’s brief historical bio-data. I did this to show how her exposure to Western and Eastern dance styles influenced her to refresh the Indian dance styles that she had learned. It is to discuss how her inspiration to create magnificent bharatanatyam performances came from the blending of Western and Eastern theatrical elements, as well as her own reflective thoughts of the beauty found in all arts.

In the 1930s, after having being exposed to Indian dance, Rukmini Devi was eager to revitalize the dance form that was dying off. The sadir dance, which was considered by the British rulers as a dance of the prostitutes, was abolished. It was presented as a sensuous dance after being corrupted by the patronization of the Kings, as more dances were performed in the royal courts than in the temples.

In order to revive the dance in a very elegant manner, Rukmini withdrew all the elements that portrayed the dance as merely sensual beauty. She did this by removing the sringara bhava / emotion of love that was predominant in the dance form. The garments for the dance, which were also seen as inappropriate were altered. This enhanced the visual aspects of the dancer and the dance. Why did Rukmini make these changes? Why did she want to enhance Indian dance?
To answer these questions, I will examine the various processes Rukmini undertook to re-establish the classical *bharatanatyam* dance style, from a new perspective. These changes were done in different stages of her life. She was dedicated to enriching Indian dance aesthetics.

Even though *bharatanatyam* was considered a sacred dance that belongs to the temple, Rukmini wanted this dance form to be reachable to the public as an expression of Indian aesthetics beauty. In order to make it more accessible and moral for 20th century conditions, she “purified” and “spiritualized” the whole concept of *bharatanatyam* (O’Shea, 2005:225). In fact, Janet O’ Shea argues that the revival of *bharatanatyam* by Rukmini started from these concepts (ibid). Not only did Rukmini approach the art in this fashion, but as Avanthi Meduri notes, Rukmini also brought the essence of ritual and its philosophies into the dance forms (Meduri, 2001: 109).

The emphasis on “spiritual, purify and ritual” elaborates how these elements helped to shape Rukmini’s creative talents in *bharatanatyam*. Indeed, O’Shea argues that every approach used to revive the structure of *bharatanatyam* was conceived by Rukmini through the lens of western ballet “classicism” ⁹ (O’Shea, 2005: 230, Lopez, 1993: 13f.n.). Rukmini, I argue was able to do this because Pavlova’s conceptualization of Western ballet as “high art” influenced and enabled Rukmini to comfortably refresh *bharatnatyam* in this manner (ibid: 229).

In re-establishing *bharatanatyam*, Rukmini also introduced group performances as Indian ballets in her dance productions (ibid). O’ Shea argues that scholars might perceive Rukmini’s production as an intercultural presentation with the hybridity of

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⁹ The revival of *bharatanatyam* as a classical form is due equally to the effort of K. Bharata Iyer, another legendary dancer in the ninetieth and the beginning twentieth centuries (Lopez, 1993: 13).
colonialism (ibid: 230). In fact, these approaches by Rukmini were thought to have contaminated the beauty of Indian dance form (ibid: 229).

However, Rukmini Devi I argue was more concerned in making the Indian dance accessible to the contemporary space and time. It is because of Rukmini that bharatanatyam is being developed in various ways throughout the world (ibid: 230). I contend that if Rukmini did not conceive bharatanatyam in this manner, the world would not have seen or experienced the beauty of this dance in a new perspective.¹⁰

Indeed, Rukmini’s creative thoughts were far ahead of her time and her contemporaries. In order to bring the beauty of bharatanatyam out into the public and onto the world stage, Rukmini incorporated theatrical elements that accentuated the performance experience in Indian dance production. In her own creative ways, Rukmini also imbibed the essence of “bhakti or devotion to the Divine form” in her performances (Coorlawala, 2005:181). Gowri Ramnarayan states that in one of Rukmini’s dance performance:

> The stage was at first in a semi-darkness…The music grew stronger, and the lights came on and against the green curtains of the background, Rukmini appeared in her archaic white and gold dress, looking like some temple carving, full of arrested movement…For more than two hours she danced with scarcely a pause and all the time the audience sat spellbound absorbed by the beauty of movement, no less by telling of beloved stories in voice, gesture, and expression.

(in Meduri 2005: 204-205)

This demonstrates how Rukmini used design elements, such as lights and backdrop, to enhance the performance experiences. In fact, Rukmini herself stress that lighting

¹⁰ In this discussion, I would also like to acknowledge the contribution made by the legendary dancer, Balasaraswati. She was considered a devadasi and had performed in many parts of the world prior to Rukmini’s era. I have not mentioned her performances, as my focus is grounded on the development of choreography in bharatanatyam by Rukmini Devi, and not on the pure form of the sadir dance, which I consider has its own beauty.
design concepts were a crucial component in her dance productions (ibid: 13,207,211). In the writings of Ramnarayan, we are once again reminded on how Rukmini designed her performance space and how the costume and the lighting effects created the effect of the dance as “temple carving”.

Indeed, in my engagement with Indian dance theatre, the design elements as part of choreography is symbolically and aesthetically presented to link back to its cultural experiences. I would argue that the designs in Rukmini’s dance choreography as visual expressions are intended to enhance the performance, thereby transport the audiences’ into an “historical continuum” (Meduri 2005: 206).

To further enhance performance experiences within the historical continuum, Rukmini also included chorus singing. In her performance, Meduri describes,

...on one side the ensemble of musician, including her guru, were seated on rugs, with their picturesque instruments; on the other a group of young men appeared chanting in unison a most impressive dedication of the dance recital Bharata Natya to Nataraja, that aspect of Divine life.

(Meduri, 2005:205)

Meduri argues that the creation of these dance innovations by Rukmini was meant to uplift the performance experiences to a “spiritualized and transcendentalized temporal recital” (ibid). Indeed, the inclusion of chorus chanting, stage arrangement, costume and lighting effects are indicative, in my opinion, of a total concept of choreography. However, this technique of presentation to some Indian theatre traditionalist could be argued as the concept of choreography conceived from a Western theatrical mode.

Even then, the concept of Indian dance theatre has always been characterized by suggestive or symbolic modes of communication. Meduri says that Rukmini used the
three concepts of *Nataraja, Natyasastra and Guru* as the foundation for her dance productions (ibid: 205-212). In every performance, the technique of choreography and stage designs were all premised from the ideas of these three symbols (ibid).

Indeed, the main objective for Rukmini was to create a dance that could best reveal the essence of Indian aestheticism through symbolic and aesthetic presentation. As Meduri argues, Rukmini’s stage techniques were able to create a trademark in the dance arena because it “enabled the idealization and particularization, metaphorization and historicization, abstraction and temporalization…all at once” (ibid: 206).

Rukmini’s approach to choreography engaged the performer and the audience in the experience of the visual and the sound that is taking place in the “immediate presence.” In this way, choreography stimulates the senses and uplifts the overall performance experiences.

By using such choreographic techniques, Meduri argues that Rukmini’s creations, presented a “real” dramatization through the “projection of the voice” by means of “choral effects” (Meduri, 2005: 210). Performance reviewers felt that Rukmini’s techniques in choreography were “conveying an otherworldly experience” (ibid). Such choreographic innovations, according to Meduri raise the art to a “sacramental and spiritual” state, which is closely related to the essence of Indian theatre described in the ancient text (ibid).

By understanding the Indian aesthetic concepts in performance, Rukmini Devi was able to develop dance movements and design techniques to elaborate on the spiritual aspects of Indian art too. For her, the act of creating dance performances on stage was
constantly to engage the space as temple space and temple art. In that manner, her approach to dance was clearly a form of devotion that used traditional and modern stage techniques. It was to bring out the essence of India art in its purest form.

Moreover, according to Sunil Kothari, the techniques of *bharatanatyam* presentation were developed into “an entirely new form” by Rukmini (Kothari, 2004: 51). She was the first artist to reorganize the accompaniment of musicians, and added new costume designs, stage settings and excellent theatre lighting in all her dance productions (ibid). All this was precisely planned to highlight traditional aesthetics, imbued in ancient text and Indian sculpture which, ultimately, enhanced the performance experience as an “entirely new form” (ibid).

This means that choreography is not only confined to the dancer’s bodily movements and expressions. Clearly, the “entirely new form”, observed by Sunil Khotari, defines choreography as the “expression of various mediums” that embraces the whole performance space. At the same time, however, I contend that all other mediums introduced in performance also represent as expressions of the dancer, the dance and the creator. Rukmini in that manner explored various mediums to extend the intended expressions and meanings.

Rukmini in her choreography also used the combined techniques of *bharatanatyam* and *Kathakali* to demonstrate the aspects of feminine and masculine movements (ibid: 80-81). In order to accentuate the performance experiences, Rukmini included dance movements and the sound of drums to create these dual modes of expressions (ibid). Moreover, the dance-dramas were also choreographed to incorporate mobile props that were moved by the dancers during the dance. To extend the dance into a
visual phenomenon, “sophisticated lighting effects” were designed as part of the overall choreographic techniques (ibid).

However, as a dancer I would ask, if Rukmini was using the bharatanatyam and Kathakali techniques to enhance her dance performances, why did she use other elements as part of choreography? Is not the traditional dance body supposed to communicate *every* expression?

Sunil Khotari argues that the designs used in Rukmini’s dance were treated as symbolic and suggestive elements that enabled her to enhance the performance (ibid). I argue that the application of design as part of Indian dance choreography in Rukmini’s productions is intended to project the theatrical technique as something beyond its physical presentation. Rukmini was concerned with the ‘total form’ of the performance, to uplift the performance to another dimension (Meduri, 2001:109). Hence, Meduri argues that by concentrating on the “form” as suggestive and aesthetic, Rukmini was able to open up the tradition that seeks to go beyond the concepts of sacredness in arts (ibid).

In conclusion, Rukmini’s choreographic techniques embraced other mediums. It was to express her dance visions as a total performance experience. Rukmini’s genuine love of classicism in my view has enhanced the style of bharatanatyam and Indian dance-drama choreography. This evoked the senses to experience the bharatanatyam as a form of exalted art. To this, Janet O’Shea argues that the reproduction or restoration of bharatanatyam by Rukmini is seen as a theatrical technique that is interconnected with “global, modernist concerns” (O’Shea 2003: 178). While the recreation is a significant form of “high” art (ibid). Nevertheless, in my view, the terms “modernist concerns” and “global” do not constitute bharatanatyam as a
modern art form. Rather, Rukmini in her innovative creations, aimed to recreate the essence of Indian art through what is achievable in the modern world, and, thus, heightened the performance aesthetic experiences.

**Unique Creativity by CHANDRALEKHA**

One of the most interesting contemporary dancer and choreographer that India has ever produced is the legendary Chandral ekha. During the 1950s and 1960s, she was well known as a *bharatanatyam* dancer. In 1970s, she left the dance scene to campaign for women’s and human rights. After a decade, she returned to the dance arena and was soon recognized as India’s revolutionary dance creator. Her approach towards life and ideals are apparent in her choreographic works.

In understanding her background, I wish to explore how the choreographer’s visions of dance are affected and how the artistic applications initiated a new meaning or understanding of Indian dance. In my opinion, all of these connotations contribute to the purpose of the thesis, that is, to argue how Indian dance when well integrated and executed with design and dance techniques, aims to create enhanced performance experience in the dancer, the observer and the dance. In this respect, Chandralekha’s choreographic works are a testament to many dancers and choreographers.

Even though Chandralekha was trained as a *bharatanatyam* dancer, she conceptualized her creative works very differently. Her life experiences in dealing with issues facing women and human rights made her understand the physical body in a more complex manner. Consequently, one can see how Chandralekha uses the body (ways in which she saw the body) as a dynamic force. For her, this energy represented movements. She creates ideas in dance that are made and manifest as
male and female energy. In her approach to Indian dance, she notes that it is embodied in the context of the twentieth century and not of the past (Chandralekha, 2003: 54-58). Even though she is seen as a revolutionary by many, she describes herself as an “absolute traditionalist who believes in human freedom” to express life experiences in dance. She presents these beliefs and ideas in her dance works as form, movement and space.

In Chandralekha’s choreography, the most important aspects of her creative input extend from her background and her concern with the extreme oppression of female thoughts (Chatterjea, 2004: 11). She joined the freedom struggle because she noticed that the female body was always threatened by sexual politics under wider supporting activities (ibid). Such social encounters, argued Ananya Chatterjea, led Chandrakekha to experiment with new ways of using dance space (ibid). In doing so, Chandralekha’s works were seen as “new” and “modern” within a specific dance context (ibid). In this regard, I propose that her style had a feeling of “body energy bursting out into the space.” This, I believe, significantly related to her creative works that used the “body” to express various energies.

Chandralekha undoubtedly expressed her awareness of Indian aesthetics and her idealism of her social-political views through the art of dance choreography. The blend of controversial ideas, which Chandrakekha experienced in her life, brought forth new dimensions to the arena of Indian dance, not only in India, but also to the world stage.

Indeed, as I have noted, she was a traditional bharatanatyam dancer before she made this huge leap into another world. She did so to explore the other side of
bharatanatyam, along with Indian arts and its culture. What made her decide this and why another world? Chandralekha recounted her experience, thus:

One of the crucial experiences that shaped my response and attitude to dance was during my very first public dance recital (arangetram) in 1952. It was a charity programme in aid of the Rayalseema Drought Relief Fund. I was dancing "Mathura Nagarilo", depicting the river Yamuna, the water-play of sakhis, the sensuality, the luxuriance, and abundance of water. Suddenly, I froze, with the realization that I was portraying all this profusion of water in the context of a drought. I remembered photographs in the newspaper of cracked earth, of long, winding queues of people waiting for water with little tins in hand. Here, Guru Ellappa was singing "Mathura Nagarilo." Art and life seemed to be in conflict. The paradox was stunning. For that split second I was divided, fragmented into two people.

(Chandralekha: 2003: 50)

From this quotation, it appears that paradox, disagreement and contradictions caused tension in Chandralekha’s thoughts; I argue that her practices and attitude towards her traditions suddenly opened up to another realm. During her debut public performance, Chandralekha’s feelings were fragmented with real life images. In fact, Chandralekha felt that all the experiences and the social problems that one goes through in life, can haunt and influence one to face dance in a different manner (ibid). Ananya Chatterjea equally voiced this when she noted that Chandralekha’s dance choreography was coiled within the context of the repulsion and brutality that a woman endures in her life (Chatterjea, 2001: 390). Therefore, in my view, Chandralekha envisioned her artistic creation in dance as a metaphor that questions such nostalgic reoccurrences of visions. This harshness in life motivated her to turn the coin and see a more effective way to approach and present the traditional dance form.

Indeed, for Chandralekha, these reflections predominantly urged her to push the traditional culture towards “positive energy” to spring forth a “harmonized” cultivation in her work (Chandralekha, 2003: 50). Chandralekha, rather than creating
conflicts within the traditional art form, embraced its richness and integrated “these diverging directions in order to remain sensitive and whole” to her cultural and traditional background (ibid).

Such a divergence of emotions expressed by Chandralekha has also affected my creative approach to dance. Undoubtedly, as a traditional dancer myself, approaching the art in a contemporary way has made me think of the consequences that I face. Nonetheless, the more I partake in the practice and theoretical analysis of dance; it has deepen my understanding of Indian dance and its associated art forms. I argue that the discourse here is not about tradition itself, rather is about how tradition extracts the inner experiences to further explore the art form and its different dimensions.

Out of such fundamental experiences, sprout a new beginning, a new standing or a new seed and that is what Chandralekha appears to have generated. Chandralekha affirms this when she refers to the spine of a woman as the starting point: “From being broken up, divided, alienated, I have to learn how to stand” (in Bharucha, 1995: 33). Indeed, Bharucha quotes that when Chandralekha confronts her creative work it is as the “beginnings of a ‘gesture’ reaching out towards change” (ibid: 31). What is this change and what gesture? I shall now explore Chandralekha’s creative works that are “centred in her understanding of the body” (ibid: 33).

Certainly, for any dancer, the most important aspect of creativity stems from the body. The body is not only physical; it also comprises the mind and the spirit. In my experience, in a performance the body goes through various changes and responds to situations differently at different times and spaces. The traditionally trained body
contradicts within to differ from the norm of tradition, but strives to experiment with contemporary forms that are rooted within the traditionally disciplined body.

Hence, in her choreographic work see how Chandralekha intertwines the body’s quest within Indian dance traditions and aesthetics to put forward a new found meaning. In her dance piece called *Tillana*, she presented the body as the *mandala*, the centre of the cosmos, to generate new movement. She expresses these conceptual ideas as:

> In terms of the body, *mandala* is a holistic concept integrating the human body with itself, with the community and with the environment. It generates a centred, tensile, and complex visual form. It is a principle of power, of stability, of balance, of holding the earth...of squaring or circularising the body and breaking the tension and rigidity of the vertical line by curve.

*(in Bharucha, 1995: 59)*

Chandralekha used these concepts of *mandala* to extend the tradition of *bharatanatyam* dance repertoire of *Tillana*, to another level. In this piece, various forms of movement occupied the performance space. Rather then following the norm of tradition, where the solo dancer executes movements almost within a restricted spot, she used the entire space to expand her understanding of *Tillana*. She did this by creating group movements that rapidly moved across the stage at different angles, creating lines, curves and forms (ibid: 60).

Indeed, to Chandralekha, these movements clearly reflected her experiences in life that were always harmonized, confronted and conflicted (ibid). Bharucha argues that by confronting the traditional form of *Tillana* in this manner, Chandralekha was able to expand the concept of *mandala* to energize the whole performance space. Bharucha further states that Chandralekha’s choreography for the proscenium stage, seen as a limitation to traditional Indian dance, was enhanced by her ability to understand space and go beyond the immediate body space (ibid). Bharucha says:
...one should acknowledge that the intrinsic multi-dimensionality of the concept of mandala is, more often than not, neutralised if not flattened in the two-dimensional space of the proscenium. This rectangle stage space has, unfortunately become almost the only space in which dance is viewed in India today. To Chandra’s credit, her understanding of the very limits of the proscenium (which has framed all her productions) has enabled her to explore dimensions in space with an illusion of “three-dimensionality” rarely experienced in [Indian] dance or theatre today.

(ibid: 60)

In my view, the choreographic concepts that Chandralekha introduced in her productions, produced the art of “choreography” as beyond that which characterized Indian classical dance. This did not jeopardize the tradition; rather she sought new meanings in the art form. In fact, when the legendary Rukmini Devi saw the innovative work of Chandralekha, she expressed her admiration thus:

Such wonderful enthusiasm – I’ve never seen anyone like Chandralekha in this respect and she has done this work with tremendous devotion and great originality. I’ve never seen alanippu like this. I’ve never seen tillana like this.

(in ibid: 66)

According to Bharucha, Rukmini Devi complimented Chandralekha’s choreography because it has greatly created an impact on her (ibid: 65). Rukmini was overwhelmed to see how traditional dance aesthetics could explore the performance space in a different manner. In fact, Rukmini related Chandralekha’s dance formations to that of the divinely order. For example,

There’s is a saying which many occultists have said that “God geometrises.” That’s a phrase I’ve been accustomed to. And I think [Chandralekha] too has “geometrised” because there is occult meaning in dance too… I was deeply interested in [Chandralekha’s] ideas and in her originality.

(ibid: 66)

This observation by Rukmini Devi, according to Bharucha, defined Chandralekha’s choreography as one that enriched the traditional dance form (ibid: 64). Bharucha argues that Chandralekha’s innovation was of “historical importance” to the growth
of Indian dance. He saw Rukmini’s understanding and appreciation of Chandralekha’s innovations, as akin to “acknowledging their seminal contributions to Bharatanatyam” (ibid: 65).

Therefore, I contend that the choreography of Chandralekha as appreciated by Rukmini, indicates that the art of choreography is not only confined to traditional ways of expression, but reflects tradition in multiple platforms. Chandralekha was, therefore, able to explore the performance space beyond the confines of traditional practice, which was also acknowledged by the bharatanatyam revivalist, Rukmini.

In fact, Bharucha further declares that, Chandralekha’s new “beginnings” would have been even more appreciated had Rukmini lived to see Chandralekha’s many other later innovative productions (ibid: 66). It was in these later productions, argues Bharucha, that the creative talents of Chandralekha were more fully exhibited (ibid: 66-67).

In late 1980s to the 1990s, Chandralekha continued to create new works that explored the body in different ways. Drawing from her own life experiences in human rights’ movements and as a writer, designer of posters and books, and her involvement in multi-media projects, Chandralekha took the stage by storm. She used every life-experienced moment in her dance choreography and incorporated traditional forms. She engaged the art of yoga, Chhau, Kalaripayattu (Kerala martial arts) with the techniques of bharatanatyam (Bharucha 1995, Chatterjea, 2001). Chatterjea argues that this integration of techniques in Chandralekha’s creative works allowed her to produced performances that reflected a “somatic wholeness, where the physical and
psychic processes work in concert, exploring new dimension of self” (Chatterjea, 2004: 58).

One such creative work, which addresses these concepts, is “netranritya- the dance of the eyes” – section of “Interim” dance production (ibid: 61). This production was part of a collaborative project between Chandralekha and visual artists, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel. It was sponsored by the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Visual Arts Initiative program. It was a project that explored dance with design elements.

In this project, Chandralekha used techniques of lighting, stage settings and multimedia to experiment with the concept of the eye, very distinct from the traditional use of eye gestures in bharatanatyam (ibid: 60-61). Traditional practitioners would immediately assume that the use of these various mediums constitutes Western form of theatrical expression. Before making such assumptions it is important to observe how and why Chandralekha used these design elements in her performances. In the production of Interim at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1995,

Three women sit in a tight triangle on the floor, their feet crossed, their knees up and held by the flexed elbows, the forearms running across the shins to claps the hands in front. They sit in front of a large copper plate, on which light falls: on dimmed stage, their faces are lit by the reflected glow from the copper plate, their eyes caught as if in the bronze flush of a setting sun.

(Chatterjea, 2004: 62)
In a normal Indian traditional dance, such as bharatanatyam, the concepts of choreography described by Chatterjea do not exist. Yet the technique used in Interim is bharatanatyam. The traditional concepts, I argue, is further enriched with the use of design elements, such as the large copper plate to accentuate specific expressions. As Chatterjea describes, the light that is reflected from the copper plate radiated the dancers’ faces and the brilliance from the copper plate created the sense of a “setting sun” (ibid). Visualizing this as the concept of sun, immediately suggest tradition, as the Sun in Indian thought also symbolizes “shakti / power” (Sharma, 1973: 294,381).

One may ask, can such visual expressions be created through traditional dance techniques alone? In using these design elements in the dance, is tradition being jeopardized? In my view, such choreography by Chandralekha consists of certain concepts that needed to be expressed in the performance space. These concepts included “an abstract sensing of the passage of time” and visions that are not governed by “physical time” (Chatterjea, 2004: 62). The light that shines on the
copper plate suggests that the dancers’ expressions are being reflected as the energy from the radiant sun (Image 6).

In fact, the dancers who are seated in front of the glowing copper plate suggest a ritual formation. The radiance that Chatterjea described as “setting sun” symbolizes the element of fire, which is central in ritualistic performances. Such choreographic concepts can be equated to the concept of the sun as providing the energy of life:

> As the light of life, fire is the brilliance of intelligence, the ardour of strength and the glow of health. It is also the energy of passion, of anger and lust. Indeed, the very universe is the result of the spark of divine desire, the One wishing to be many. In Vedic worship fire is personified as the god Agni and known as “the All Possessor”, “the Purifier”, the Resplendent”… In Hinduism, light is offered to the image of the deities, as a symbol of our own consciousness, and the enlightenment which is its fulfillment.

(Shearer, 1993: 36-37)

Chandralekha’s concept of visual choreography, which is evident in the production of *Interim*, denotes the symbolic design as the power of “women radiance.” The glow, mentioned by Chatterjea, resembles the “copper plate as fire” and as energy of “passion, anger and lust”, which is reflected on the faces of the female dancers. The idea of such choreographic form also represents the idea of propitiating to the glowing copper as *yantra*. It represents the power of illumination.

Indeed, she uses these concepts to symbolize Agni / Fire that represents women’s emotions and personifying the idea of “power.” By using such symbols, Chandralekha, created the sense of “enlightenment” in women. Such choreography presents the essence of womanhood, says Bharucha. He notes that “it is only through dance that such an “abstract” embodiment of the woman could be realized” (Bharucha, 1988: 30).
Ananya Chatterjea looked further into the performance space and describes Chandralekha’s innovative talents in “Interim - netranritya- the dance of the eyes.” She elaborates how Chandralekha’s creative ideas imbued other mediums to express the notion of time and space in netranritya. She expresses her experiences, thus:

The six pupils move in perfect harmony, black on white, side, side-to-side, around, up, down, up-and down, in varying patterns. The measured, slow dance of the eyes is punctuated by a series of quick oscillations, side-to-side, as if watching for the arrival of something imminent. The eyes quiet to arrive at sama, front. Then quick flickerings, the eyelids moving for the first time to open and close, like the flame of a candle threatened by the breeze. [...] This final meeting of eyes that comes after what I can describe as an intense search, marks a silently climatic moment in the piece. For it performs brilliantly Chandralekha’s ideas about the movement of time, an ephemeral concept, which can be measured only through such momentary phenomena such as the opening and closing of an eye.

(Chatterjea, 2004: 62)

In order to accentuate the choreographic understanding of time and space through the concept of eye, Chandralekha also used the “eye” as projected image. The “eye”, in this case is considered as design in space. It is the eye that perpetuates to signify the performance as taking place across time and, in that process design becomes a choreographic component. It is a composite of the dance. This is evidently reflected in the following production pictures, (Image 7):

![Interim - photo 1](image1)
![Interim - photo 2](image2)
These various images (photo 1 to 4) from the production of *Interim* (“the dance of the eye”), visually demonstrate how Chandralekha used design elements as part of her creative dance choreography. In her performance review Joan Acocella’s says,

In *Interim*, installation artists Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel teamed up with Indian choreographer Chandralekha and percussionist T.H. Subash Chandran to create a piece about the innards of time, how time would seem if you could only penetrate it. On the back wall, on a shelf maybe 20 feet above the floor, lay a man sleeping. Hanging over him was his shadow, a silhouette that must have been painted on rubber, for as the show progressed it was stretched sideways, via ropes pulled by two women sitting in chairs that were also mounted perilously high on the wall.

(Acocella, 1995: 83)

This suggests that in the dance of *Interim*, Chandralekha visually expressed “the movement of time” as “an ephemeral concept” by integrating design as part of choreography. The description by Acocella, clearly indicates that the use of design elements, such as the shadow, silhouette and the stretching effects, potentially
emphasize the notion of time in Indian dance performance. This differs to the traditionally way of presenting time-space.

In fact, Jones and Ginzel stated that the designs executed as part of choreography in *Interim* constitutes “an inquiry into how a moment in time might appear if captured and subsequently stretched.”\(^{11}\) Further, to reflect on the expansion of the time as “infinite”, the choreography was demarcated by projecting a single blinking of the eye over the period of the performance (Chatterjea, 2004: 62).

Therefore, to present such innovative ideas of time and space, Chandralekha needed to introduce other mediums into her dance choreography. The representation of design in *Interim* is not presented as realistic elements, but as suggestive symbolic visual components. Such integration in choreography is able to express Chandralekha’s concept of time. As Chatterjea states it was to emphasise “the measurement of time across no time” and this was done by means of projecting the image of a single blinking eye (Chatterjea, 2004: 62-63).

In incorporating other mediums into her choreography, arguably, the purpose is to create an enhanced experience in Indian dance performance. In my opinion, it is this experience as *rasa* that is important to the development of Indian dance that constitute other mediums too. Thus, the question is not about the mediums that are used in performance, but how such mediums can generate and enrich Indian aesthetic concepts by way of integrating various theatrical mediums. Bharata argues that in using such ideas and techniques, the intention of dance and drama is to evoke an experience in the audience regardless of how it is presented (Vatsyayan, 1976: 8-9).

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\(^{11}\) Refer to www.jonesginzel.com/Interim.html (accessed April 17, 2005).
Indeed, Chandralekha’s performances, I argue, was able to capture the essence of space, time and energy within Indian philosophical thoughts. Moreover, her understanding of the “body” in a dynamic way also enabled her to enhance the performance using design elements that she considered crucial to reinforce her ideas in dance. Therefore, the purpose for Chandralekha’s chorographical ideas was to externalize her internal embedded experiences to express them once again in various mediums and, ultimately, enhance the audiences’ perceptions and the dance.

Chandralekha, by using design mediums as part of her choreography, also expanded the dance energy into the vast performance space. For example, the projection of the eye was an extended emotion that Chandralekha wanted to create visually. She did this so that the viewer could also experience it. In this manner, design enhanced the performance expressions. Therefore, it can be argued that by integrating design in Indian dance performances, a deeper understanding and meaning of specific themes is enhanced. It is also aesthetically presented and experienced.

**Conclusion**

In any dance performance, the idea of creating or making dance is known as the art of choreography. Since, the thesis aim to address the issues of enhancements in contemporary performance space, the chapter on choreography was crucial to highlight this point.

The chapter therefore emphasized the term ‘choreography’ and ‘composition’, and explained how it has been used in the context of Western and Eastern dance. It emphasized how the term composition is a favorable word to Indian dance practitioners. The word choreography to some tends to be another art by itself.
However, the chapter discussed its developments in an historical sense and proceeded to analyze various choreographic works. To recapture how tradition and modern approach were used in Indian dance theatre, the chapter studied how various artists have applied innovative ideas in their dance choreography.

The aim of the chapter was to search for the various techniques in choreography that can further extend performance experiences. In particular, I discussed the idea that Indian dance is not simply about body, but also about but how other mediums integrated with the body and within the dance enables a better understanding of the inner dimensions of Indian aesthetics. This was explored through various examples that demonstrated the importance of design as part of choreography.

Thus, the concept and creative art of choreography can be better achieved through a thorough understanding of design elements that can enhance and enrich the Indian dance ideas. As I have shown, the use of design as symbolic expression and integrated within a dance can create another level of seeing, understanding and experiencing the Indian dance performance. This symbolic expression is also able to evoke *rasa* in the audience.

Choreography, therefore, in my opinion does not only confine to the dancer’s body but it is also the exploration of space. As I have argued space defines choreography. Within this space, I see the possibility of creating a vision, an expression that grounds Indian dance choreography beyond its norm - A vision that is not tied down by traditional boundaries, but allows contemporary approach to enrich its values and aesthetic.
In that manner, the idea of choreography in contemporary performance space can be treated as creating a painting; where lines, colours, forms and shapes are produced by using various mediums (dancer and design). Thus, it is integrated to generate a vision of unity as the intention expression. Choreography then becomes the creation of symbolic forms that is also aesthetically appealing in performance space. Hence, the creation of a vision is no more seen as an art of choreographing the body alone, rather choreography in Indian dance is perceived as a composite of various theatrical forms.

Therefore, the aim is to constantly focus on the objective of the dance and express it in the most effective way. The art of choreography in Indian dance thus can go beyond its normal boundaries and create the intended meanings to enhance performance experiences to a wider audience.
CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDY 1 – VISHWA VINAYAKA

Introduction

The main aim in undertaking an arts project as a case study is to explore the possibilities that can be implemented, and explore problems in real contexts with the goal of providing practical solutions. In that way, ideas and concepts then can be produced and transformed into actual space. In the field of performing arts, it is crucial to experiment with the organics of form and space. This is because not only is art considered expressive in itself, but is also affected by the way space is arranged. Dance as an art form is also a culmination of various theatrical elements when presented in theatre spaces.

The other factor that affects how art is observed is the way in which the artwork is composed or choreographed. A work of art can be produced to suit a theme, a function or based on production costs. At times created works are also made to suit a specific space. Irrespective of the case, the crucial outcome is that the work of art developed using various techniques with different mediums, focuses on creating an experience in the creator and the observer. In the context of Indian art, this is referred as creating or stimulating the rasa or aesthetic experience.

In the previous chapters on form and formless, space transformation and choreography, I emphasised that the main purpose of such study is to examine how these components when applied in theatre spaces can affect performance experiences. The thesis thus focuses specifically on the inner dimensions of Indian dance and the arts. It addresses the collaboration of design and dance and observes how these then can enhance the Indian dance theatre experiences.
In this chapter, I will discuss the various creative ideas that were explored in producing the dance production of *Vishwa Vinayaka* - in praise of the Hindu elephant faced God, Lord Ganesha. Most of the discussions will be based on the production that took place at the Burswood Theatre, Perth, Australia on the 7th April 2006.

The discussion in this chapter aims to recreate the experiences that were conceptualised and idealised as a process towards enhancing Lord Ganesha’s magnificent form and its meanings. In order to emphasise the intention of the thesis: “Enhancing the Performance Experience in Indian Dance Theatre”, the chapter will be divided into four sections.

The first section will describe the concepts of Lord Ganesha and explain why he is regarded as an important icon. The second section will explain the theme of the *Vishwa Vinayaka* dance production. Following that, section three will highlight the processes and experiments undertaken to create the performance. This section is crucial, as it emphasises how ideas were explored and why it is important to create the enhanced performance experience from the initial stage of pre-production to its actual implementation in theatre. Finally, in section four, the various segments in the performance are analysed to primarily engage the reader in experiencing the performance. This is possible by focusing on some of the creative ideas that were

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1 The concept of the production was possible with the guidance from His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati (founder, Temple of Fine Arts). Choreography: Saseedaran K. Anandan, Sukhi Shetty Krishnan, Sarasa Krishnan, Shankar Kandasamy and Umesh Shetty. Costume designer and creator: Suguna Devi Saseedaran and Dr. Uma Devi. Creative Director: Saseedaran K. Anandan. Lighting Design: Ravi Shetty

2 The performance at Burswood Theatre is considered the culmination of ideas gained from the previous performance held in Hyderabad, Bombay, Coimbatore and Singapore. In some of these venues, certain ideas could not be implemented due to technical constraints. However, Burswood Theatre facilities initiated further ideas that enriched the performance experience.
applied in the dance. The discussions will be based upon the different scenes that were created in the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka*. Through such examination, I wish to address the importance of the various integrated enhancements that were produced to stimulate the observer’s mind, and, thereby enhance the performance experience.

**Reverence to Lord Ganesha**

In the Indian mythological stories and in the field of Indian art, there are many deities or Gods that Hindus worship. These images are revered differently in India and in many parts of the world. There are also special festivals and ceremonies that are ordained to these Gods.

One such deity, who is celebrated and well known around the world, is the magnificent form of Lord Ganesha. The visual form of Ganesha is represented in many different ways - abstract, contemporary and modern. All these representations are symbolically presented to glorify Ganesha as one of the most likeable Gods. Not only is Ganesha popular in India. This magnificence elephant-faced form has also been found archeologically and admired in many countries such as Japan, China, ancient Greece, South- East Asia and the Far-East and in other cultures, such as Buddhism (Subramuniaswami, 1996; Krishan, 1999)

However, Lord Ganesha is popularly recognised by his elephantine and human body. There are many stories that explain Ganesha’s origin and his manifestation. I will explain one of these origins in section four (scene 5) of this chapter. Nonetheless, in the next section, I will briefly explain Lord Ganesha’s form. The Image 1 illustrates his most popular form.
This four-armed Ganesha is a most renowned figure. His symbolic figures are associated with the process of life and the whole concept of the universe. M. Arunachalam (1980: 112) says,

His four arms stand for His immense power in helping humanity. The noose and the goad borne in two of His hands stand for His all-pervasiveness and grace. The broken tusk in the right hand shows that He is the refuge for all. His huge belly is indicative of His tolerance and also signifies that all things, the entire Universe, are contained in Him. His feet stand for the bestowal of siddhi and buddhi, attainment of desires and knowledge. The modaka (sweet goody) in His hand is symbolic of jnana, conferring bliss. His mount, the shrew, represents the worldly desires which are to be overcome.

All these characteristics present Ganesha as a symbolic amalgamation of contrasting elements that play an important role in the everyday activities of Hindus. Therefore, Ganesha is well known as the Lord that creates and removes obstacles and, so, he is revered as the Lord for any new beginning or undertaking. He is considered the controller of the material world, as well as the Lord to spiritual path (Shankar, 2003).
He is adored by Hindus and is honoured during rituals, festivals, preparations for pilgrimages, and the commencement of any trade. Hence, in each month there are special days that this deity is significantly celebrated and given prominence (Shattuck, 1999: 84-85).

In the arena of Indian dance, Lord Ganesha is also revered and acknowledged as an important icon. Here, he is considered as the Lord of the beginning and success, and is therefore initiated or introduced into the performance space at the opening of a dance recital (Reck, 1972: 12). In traditional theatre, and especially in Sanskrit classics, Ganesha is also revered as the presiding deity for theatre performances (Awasthi and Richard, 1989: 49).

However, regardless of the nature of any Indian dance or music program, Ganesha is always given importance in performance space. Some of the performance may comprise a brief introduction to the deity, while others may present a lengthy adoration to the Lord. Even music performances include an invocatory item, paying obeisance to Lord Ganesha. It is said that,

In some performances only elaborate prayers are offered to him by the chorus of actors, [dancers] and musicians. Different kinds of devotional prayer songs are sung and his blessing is sought. However in some performances his symbol – an idol or elephant mask – is brought on the stage and worshipped apart from offering him prayers. The third form of Ganesha worship is still more interesting. Here an actor [or a dancer] wearing Ganesha mask or guise appears on the stage and sometimes performs beautiful dance too.

(Varadpande, 1987: 7)

All these attributions to Lord Ganesha place him as one of the most significant deity in the daily lives of the Hindus and in the realm of Indian arts. However, in the performance of Vishwa Vinayaka, he was not only revered as the Lord of beginnings, rather the whole dance production celebrated the remarkable form of Ganesha. The
following sections will describe how his symbolic form was conceived in various ways and how these were implemented in the dance production.

The concept of *Vishwa Vinayaka*

The music for *Vishwa Vinayaka*, which was composed by the Indian composers Ajay and Atul Gokawale, is a musical tribute to the dynamic nature of Lord Ganesha’s universal appeal and personality. Popular singers, S.P. Balasubramanian and Shankar Mahadevan, also lent their unique brand of vocal expertise to this truly divine musical symphony.³ In a website article following the release of the *Vishwa Vinayaka* album, it is mentioned that;

> For the first time in the history of recorded music, traditional Ganesh *shlokas*, *stutis* and *aartis* have been recited against the musical backdrop of a symphony orchestra. *Vishwa Vinayaka*’s appeal lies in the eclectic fusion of two diverse veins to recreate sound that is at once vibrant, powerful and universal… Listen... feel... experience a truly divine musical symphony.⁴

Indeed, the concept of *Vishwa Vinayaka* dance production also emphasised a similar fusion of tradition, contemporary and modern theatre approaches. Even though the album had different musical tracks, the dance performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka* was created with concepts that inter-linked the entire production to the theme of Lord Ganesha. The titles of the six music tracks are *Jaya Jaya Suravarpoojita Jitdanavkalabha*, *Pranamya Shirasa Devam*, *Shree Ganeshaya Deemahi*, *Shree*

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³ The music album created by Atul and Ajay is also known as “*Vishwa Vinayaka*” and the dance production adopted this name. In the preparation for the dance production, necessary copyright permission was acquired from Times Music, India, to use the music for the dance performance. Atul and Ajay were also present as VIP guest audience when the production took place in Hyderabad and Singapore. The production, which was held in Hyderabad (2003), was later telecast to 62 countries worldwide by India’s national television broadcasting cooperation, Doordarshan.

Each of this music tracks was given a name to reflect the dance scenes that portrayed the universal concepts of Ganesha. The themes were also created to portray him as cosmic energy, his origin as elephant-like form and the grand festival (Visarjan)\(^5\) that is ordained to celebrate him as supremely divine. The scenes are named as “The Descent”, “Grandeur”, “Obeisance”, “Revelation”, “Episodes”, “Submission”, and “The Ascent.” The last scene is a partial repetition of the first scene music. This is intended to create a holistic link to the whole performance idea and enhancement. In that manner, Vishwa Vinayaka dance production was conceived as complete form of a circle, energised – a return to the beginning.

However, before discussing on the various scenes, I shall first explain and describe the various processes that were implemented to produce the on-stage performance experience. This section stresses the importance of understanding the many underlying concepts that permitted the dancers and the crews to experience the performance from the conceptual and experimental stages to the actual performance space.

**Exploration and Experimentation stages**

The conceptual idea for the performance space with respect to the production theme came from many different angles. Various ideas were generated to allow for

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\(^5\) The Visarjan or also known as immersion is a grand annual festival that takes place in India. It is elaborately celebrated during the Ganesha Chaturthi festival. It normally takes place in the month of September, where thousands of clay statues of Ganesha are immersed in the rivers, lakes and the sea. These statues vary in size from tiny ones to some as huge as 10 metres in height. Millions of people gather and parade to celebrate this festival. I witnessed this festival in Bombay and Pune in 2004 and I was able to reproduce some of this experience in the production of Vishwa Vinayaka (scene 6).
interaction of different spaces and forms in integrating with design components. Concepts of Lord Ganesha (form and meanings) with design elements were the primary mode in the creation of performance space for *Vishwa Vinayaka*. Thus, the conceptual space was created with these ideas in mind. Image 2 illustrates:

![Image 2 – Vishwa Vinayaka Stage Design](image)

The concept for the performance space was idealised in two ways: first, as a space that seems to be moving inwards and, second, as a space that is expanding outwards. The various design components (Image 2) were created to emphasise this constant viewing experience.

While designing the symbols for the wings, I contemplated upon the inner expression of a form and, gradually, a definite form materialised. Having externalised the form, I again contemplated to seek for a “formless state.” I have discussed this in Chapter 1, under section Form as Representation, where Kapila Vatsyayan says, “The language of metaphysics becomes the language of symbols, signs and formal design”
(Vatsyayan, 1997:20). In order to emphasise the notion of “form and the formless process”, I created the design of various symbols that also revealed these ideas and reflected the ideas of Vatsyayan’s too.

The first wing design represents the idea of fusion taking place, where the mind contemplates various “formless states.” The second wing shows the next phase of contemplation taking shape, from interweaved contours it untangles to become separate forms. The third wing design, demonstrates how a further contemplation, creates the effect of circles, where the design is conceived as concentric atoms that produce ripples as forms. The fourth wing design, symbolises the ultimate form, which was created from the three previous stages of ‘formless’ in fusion. When this happens, it is perceived as a specific form, in this case, the form of Lord Ganesha and his association with the symbol Aum. The various stages of the symbol on the wings were therefore, created to emphasise the energy of Aum as it took the form of Ganesha. The symbols were designed not only to highlight a state of formless and form, but also to emphasise Lord Ganesha being idolised as Lord of the Universe. Every line and contour was visualised and created to emphasise on this point. Hence, the symbolic forms, from wing 1 to wing 4, are created to stress the notion of “creation” – from a state of formless and fusion, to a specific form.

Within the performance space, the projection screen was conceptualised as an extended expression of the dancer and the dance; where various underlying shades of emotions are expressed as moving and still images. This space can be understood as the window to the inner dimension of the dance.

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6 The symbolic lines and contours created for the performance were explained to all participants and the crew. For the dancers, this echoed to the similar movements that were portrayed in the dance. For the audience it was an overwhelming experience when they were told what the symbol represented (through performance narration and through personal conversation with the audience after every show). This can be thought of as another way of further experiencing theatre.
The other important design aspect of the production was the creation of a raised platform with steps. While designing the space, I envisaged how raised platforms are important in Indian architecture. The temple steps and Ghats along India’s sacred river are used as a means for people to ‘ascend and descend’ and to cross between the earthly and heavenly realms.

The design of the raised platform also played an important part in the creation of various dance choreography. Various dance movements, formations and patterns were generated from the concept of the raised platform. In fact, the raised platform integrated with the projection images, was used as part of choreography. Dance movements were synchronised with images and together there were co-ordinated with the music. The raised platform, the projection images and the dance, thus, were used to transform the dance space (refer to accompanying DVD).

The performance space was set up in such a way to allow dancers and design elements to interact and amalgamate as a single space and a single form in its totality. In the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka*, the fundamental idea was to create space and form that merged to enhance the performance experience in a harmonised and united way.

In order to create a sense of unison between the dancers and design with the dance, design models were created to enrich performance engagement. This was done in order to further expand the artist’s mind to the inner dimensions of space and form through a greater understanding of design elements in Indian dance. This was meant to further experience the integration of symbolic expression in performance space. The models were created to absorb the mind in the experience of the performance prior to encountering the actual performance space. This enabled the dancers and
crew to view how each theatrical element (design and dancer’s body) in performance could enhance the performance experience.

**Presenting the Design models**

Design models are commonly used in dance performances to communicate the intended ideas. For me, these models not only acted as communicative tools, but they were also used to reveal the concepts and experiences in creating such models. While creating the models, I experienced it as a choreographic work. I perceived each design model as dancers and emotions in space. Moreover, the idea of having model presentations was also intended to engage others in similar experiences. The process of presentation therefore, was to allow expressive designs to speak for themselves and, thereby, enhancing the experience in others by way of visual communion. More importantly, every phase undertaken in the production was meant to continuously seek for the communion with the grandeur of *Vishwa Vinayaka*, as a divine journey.

For the purpose of clarification and as part of my reflexive methodology through action research, I opted to do a presentation on the concept of enhancing visual performance by engaging with design. This therefore, would allow me to clarify my analysis of the performance to the dancers and other artists, as well as demonstrate how dance can be seen as design and how that would be reflected in the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka*. Image 3 shows the various three-dimensional design models that were conceptualised, created and applied to integrate with the dance.
In seeing the physical presentations, the dancers were at once familiar with the model stage space and the design forms and began to engage with them. There were many questions and responses for refreshing the performance from various angles. Dancers and technical personnel reacted by stating that “we can actually see the whole performance unfolding.” “We are aware of the design elements, but we were not able to conceive them in the holistic manner, and the model presentation enhanced our perceptions.”

The professional technical crew from the Burswood theatre, who were also invited to see the display, were equally fascinated to see their familiar theatre space replicated as a scaled model setting. It intrigued them to see the stage-set physically prior to the Vishwa Vinayaka production bump-in. They noted the actual requirements, understood the implications and suggested alternative methods in the technical

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7 This term is used in theatre to suggest the first day of moving things into the theatre, including the sets, the props, costumes, and scenery.
processes that could further enhance the performance flow and emphasise the meanings within the dance.

Once it was clear that everyone could follow the concepts and the purpose of the design elements, I proceeded to encourage them to engage with the modelled performance space further. In the next phase of my presentation, I showed the many unfolding rear projection images that could become part of the performance space. The projection presentation was synchronised with the Vishwa Vinayaka dance music.

The presentation of the projection images inspired the dancers to seek further interaction with the images. They noticed that some of the projection images in space actually resembled their dance movements. The dancers began to see how the choreography could go beyond the norm and yet embrace the essence of the performance. They saw how different spaces in relation to the projection and design elements could be further enhanced to encase the dance and the dancer as a harmonised and integrated visual form.

**The result of model presentation**

Since the ultimate purpose was to bring closer the design elements to all involved, it was also to visually enhance the many possibilities that can be created in the performance of Vishwa Vinayaka. Therefore, the creation and presentation of the scaled model were crucial in visualising how dance and design could be integrated as an artistic expression that could enrich the tradition of Indian art and dance. The presentation was also used to derive optional ideas and feedback that would also
enable those involved in the production to feel comfortable in applying design to the Indian dance performances.

To those dancers who were familiar with the performance and had performed the dance in various venues, this presentation was an added enchantment. Even though they were accustomed to the performance, this presentation re-energised their previous vigour. For those other dancers who had not been involved in the past performances, the thrill and excitement overwhelmed them upon seeing such a presentation. For them, the visual designs tended to reorganise their dance movement spaces in the performance.

The model design presented individually and collectively engaged the dancers in various perspectives. While dealing with individual design models, they connected with a personal touch. When collectively engaged it consumed their minds into embodying their interaction with space and widen their angles of perception.

As for me, the presentation stimulated enhanced visual experiences. Ideally, the presentation was able to manifest itself into many forms and possibilities. The presentation also assisted me to understand that there is a need to continuously remind the dancers and the technical crew not to be carried away by the innumerable design possibilities. The presentation was also for them to recognise the ‘when and where’, ‘how and why’, and the ‘what’ that could be enhanced at the appropriate moment in space and time of the performance.

To develop this presentation, I had to immerse myself into the characteristics of design just as I would do when performing characters in Indian dance. Design in my experience, was similar to that of the various underlying emotions and expression in
Indian dance. I argue that the purpose of such a presentation, even though sounds very technical, was meant to enhance the performance experience and, thereby, engage others to experience the same. The model presentations were meant to explore the various performance spaces and continuously engage the mind, even when the model was no longer physically present. As such, the visual presentation was able to create various possible forms and spaces that aroused a deeper understanding of design and dance collaborations. Such stimulation is what I seek, whether in dance or in design application. This is because I consider both as elements of performance, expressed through symbolic forms and this was clearly demonstrated through the model presentation.

One principal outcome of the presentation was that rather than becoming a one way process of communication, the construction of the design model enabled a two way process that engaged others to experience similar thought processes that I felt towards the performance. The whole process of presenting each model and, especially, the whole stage model space, was like a puppetry performance; manipulating the design models as sculptured puppets in an organic way. This was achieved by manoeuvring them in the model stage space without any preconceived ideas. It was intended to integrate the model figurines and the participants with the dance. It was no longer seen as a simple form of communication, rather a process of experiencing a presentation of performance in communion. This process I argue is intended to invoke a similar experience to that of an Indian dance.

Even though the presentation yielded the intended purpose of acknowledging design as part of performance experiences, it was interesting to note that the model itself motivated impressions that prompted me to interrogate thus: “What was it that
affected the dancers and crew in the presentations? Was is it the visual as in the case of models, the movements as in the case of seeing the design movements in space, or the transformed space as dance energies that affected them when engaged with such presentations?”

I would therefore argue that such presentation can initiate individual thoughts on design into a separate character. Moreover, it also invoked an enhanced comprehensive thought process that permitted the participants to experience the relationship of the various art forms in the performance of ‘Vishwa Vinayaka’. They were able to experience this process in a holistic manner. In addition, it offered a way to see how Lord Ganesha’s form can be represented through the various design and dance approaches that would further enhance the symbolic and aesthetic intentions of the performance. Every person involved in the making was also able to conceive how appropriate innovative designs can, in fact, heighten aesthetic expression of the performer, the audience and, generally, the overall performance experience. I propose that the ultimate experience in such enhanced presentations is the close engagement between the performers, the design and the performance space. Such engagements, in my view, are able to produce a total panoramic view of Indian dance theatre. The various dance and design integrations are thus capable of initiating a holistic form in a performance space.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate how the various integrations – design and dance was conceived, and how these were then implemented in the performance of Vishwa Vinayaka. Every theatrical element was carefully studied and executed to create a balanced and synchronised artistic expressions.
The Opening Scene

During the initial productions of *Vishwa Vinayaka*, held in India and Singapore, the opening scene was synchronised with the beginning of the originally composed music album. However, for the performance in Perth, I visualised the opening scene differently.

While listening to the music of *Vishwa Vinayaka* once again, I was affected by it differently in several ways. The beginning of the music, which started with the sound AUM, triggered me to ask; “what was there before that initiated the sound AUM?” If the sound AUM is believed to be the primordial sound of creation in the universe, what was there or what was it that created this sound?8

These questions stimulated me to create the possibility of beginning the *Vishwa Vinayaka* dance production in a different manner. This is to say that before the dancers begin to move their limbs, there seemed to be a need for an added opening panorama. What could this opening be? How could it be presented? Indeed, these questions inspired new ideas for the dance performance.

While contemplating on the “beginning”, I envisaged the primordial sound as a form of energy that originated from a divine force. This, I imagined as a space where all energy emerged. Could one even conceive such a “space”? However, the notion of space as we know it with our limited insights expands beyond our imagination.

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8 In Hinduism, AUM is considered to be the primordial sound that existed in the creation of the universe. It is believed to be the first sound from where all other sounds, words, languages and mantras evolved (Ramnarine, R. 1999: 220 – 221).
Arts and cultural anthropologist, Baidyanath Saraswati, reflects on the concept of space as man’s imaginative capacity that “takes him far beyond the given space” (Saraswati, 2004: 56). He further elaborates that there are two types of space reality: one that is “mythical” and another that is “mathematical”, but both ultimately merge as an experiential space of the divine (ibid: 56 & 57). In fact, the space that I visualised for the opening scene can be equated to that expressed by Saraswati – space that is divine.

While seeking for a clue to represent space, I reflected upon the philosophy of “emptiness” in Zen Buddhism. However, this emptiness and this space needed to be experienced in the performance space. The concept of emptiness seemed to create an illusion of ‘darkness’ or ‘vacuum’, but it also gave rise to a state of consciousness. This can also be said as the experience of ‘being’, while the idea of ‘being’ in the performance is in experiencing the ‘space.’

The idea of creating an opening scene before the actual dance was intended to create an experience of ‘being in space.’ This idea was also to initiate a resonance that could possibly stimulate the mind into perceiving the vast space. Therefore, in the opening scene, I wanted the audience and the performers to be absorbed into the beginning of the beginning. I chose sound as the medium to express ‘space’ – silence and creation.

Indeed, to link the concept of experiencing “space” in the opening scene, I considered sound as the possible medium in which to create sensation within us. I therefore wanted to capture sound in space that is eternally present around us. In fact, what I did next created that possible outcome.
In order to capture a sense of sound in space, I experimented with enclosing a plastic cup over one of my ears. I found that I was able to capture the presence of ‘sound-space’. It sounded like the gushing wind. It suggested to me that contained or captured space, which seems to be present everywhere, is capable of creating sound.

The experiment gave rise to the concept of representing the initial idea of absorbing the performance and, therefore, the audience into the space, where a possible beginning of creation could be experienced. The ‘wind-sound’, which was found from the simple test, was used as an effect in the beginning of *Vishwa Vinayaka*. This sound was conversely manipulated as rhythms in the subsequent cycles of sound composition for the opening scene. This generated the desired objective of representing sound in ‘space.’

The created sound was then over-layered with the sound of drums. The rumbling sound produced the feeling of energy pulsating. In order to achieve an intense sensation of throbbing, these sounds were further multiplied in layers, in echoes and in volumes. This was done to recreate the throbbing of the universe sound (*anahat*, ‘unstruck’ and the *ahata*, ‘struck’ sound) symbolically, from where all sounds emerge (Saraswati, 2004: 49).

Further, to create the sense of ‘spark or bang’ as a divine force that generated as AUM, a thunderous sound was introduced at the end of the rumbling sound. While initiating this idea, it suggested the dance of Shiva Nataraja – where the whole universe came into form and where the sound AUM represents the creative force of Lord Ganesha. As Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami says,

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9 I also initiated these ideas in order to present the “Big-Bang theory”; where the “Universe explodes into creation…” (in Adolf Grunbaum, 1993: 640) and from where matter and energy emerged (ibid).
Omkara signifies the Supreme Siva, being both vyashti (individual) and samashti (cosmic). Thus, Ganesa Aum, the divine son of Siva, is the support of the whole universe. His sound-symbol Aum is indestructible in past, present and future. It is immortal and ageless.

(Subramuniyaswami, 1996: 141)

In fact, the sound that was newly composed for the opening in Vishwa Vinayaka dance was created as vibrations that echoed continuously, dispersing into the infinite space and emerging as the sound, AUM. Having produced the sound for the opening scene, I then contemplated on how this sound could be produced visually in the performance space. Here, visual means that which is conceivable as a form to represent symbolically the sound wave (energy), the creation of AUM.10

I saw this form as a representation of the ‘supreme’ motion upon which a possible ‘sight’ is meditated. It is a symbolic form that is recognised as universal momentum of creative power. As mentioned in the Vedic concepts,

...sound and form are inseparable...Just as sound can unfurl the inmost petals of feeling and transport the mind to silence, so form can act as an instrument of transcendence by drawing the attention to the laws of nature that structure the universe. In this process, the symbol is crucial.

(Shearer, 1993: 21)

Hence, the idea of an abstract design in the form of ‘interlocking spiral’ was conceptualised as the visual symbol that could represent the pulsating sound in motion. The diagram, Image 4, illustrates these ideas:

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10 Here I am re-emphasising the energy that is before the sound AUM or that which created the sound. A simple test will demonstrate this. When reciting the syllable AUM, one can experience its power by breathing and chanting the AUM from the source of the navel (mula-dharam). There is power behind the sound AUM.
Experimenting ideas with the dancers

The new sound composition was then tested by placing different types of speakers at various locations in a studio environment. This was done to observe how the created sound could generate the sensation of space. The new sound produced was then played back to the dancers in the dance studio.

Upon listening to the new sound composition, the dancers were immediately able to relate to their first dance movement (wave-like curves) in the opening scene. They felt as though their movements were connected as one to the new sound and that their movements emerged from something far beyond their imagination. They felt that the rumbling sound created a sense of energised motion and related this as the ‘force’

11 Refer to DVD (scene 1) - choreographed movements in the shape of waves and swirls, interlocking as serpentine motion.
behind all motion. For them, the new sound seemed to have generated the sound
AUM that ultimately initiated all other movement in space.

In addition, the abstract design was also shown to the dancers (Image 4). The initial
reaction of the dancers upon seeing the design was that it represented a swirl of a
creative action. They saw the image as an intertwined dynamic gesture and associated
it with the symbol of yin and yang.\textsuperscript{12} They were also able to connect the symbolic
image to that of the dance formation, where their movements were choreographed as
a representation of creative energy in the form of a serpentine motion.\textsuperscript{13}

This whole idea was transported into the actual performance space in the Burswood
Theatre. The sound was further enhanced as “surround sound” and the abstract
swirling image (Image 5) was suspended in mid-air in the performance space.

The initial narration presented the performance of Vishwa Vinayaka, after which the
auditorium and the performance space was set to total darkness. The new sound
effects were then introduced and, as the volume and intensity of the sound increased,
the painted abstract design (Image 5) was gradually revealed by raising the main
curtain. With special lighting, the abstract form was visually presented as symbolic
motion in space. When the whole form was revealed at the right moment in time and
space, a beam of light projecting towards the whole space was introduced,

\textsuperscript{12} To the Chinese, the yin represents black, and yang represents white. Both these represent the
interaction of two energies. It also symbolises the power of continual movement that causes everything
to move in the universe in a synchronized manner. (in Charles E. Osgood and Meredith Martin
Richards, 1973: 380)

\textsuperscript{13} The serpentine concept was initiated in the dance as a form that represents a cosmic motion. It is
believed that this kind of motion is fundamental and takes shape in every movement in the universe. It
is also closely connected to the concept of spiritual enlightenment – the Kundalini. The movement of
energy in the Chakras is also referred as the serpentine motion.
synchronised with the new created thunderous sound. This was designed to create the effect of light as the source of creation.\textsuperscript{14}

The idea of creating sound as a form of energy and the idea of abstract image of ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ captured the essence of space and the beginning of creative energy in perpetual motion. The initial experiments with sound and the light could be reproduced in an enhanced way in the performance space. It was crucial that such conceptual ideas be transposed as forms in space that could then affect the performance experiences.

The whole idea of creating an ‘opening sensation’ at the beginning of the performance was to transform the space, so that audience and participants may experience a possible beginning of all beginnings. The intention was to engage people’s minds to perceive sound as a vast ‘space’ and elevate the physical performance space to a heightened experience. This was also done to study how the theme of AUM and the concepts of creation can be presented even before the actual music is introduced and before the dance movement begins. The ‘opening sensation’ purposely introduced, potentially brought the audience and the performers into another dimension of cosmic space, where the divine creative force can be visually and sonically perceived. In that, I envisage every piece of matter resonates as movement in space.

\textsuperscript{14} In some religion, \textit{light}, has been said to be the source from where the whole universe took forms (Wade, 1996: 9). Light is also seen as an aesthetic spiritual form. Here I would quote a note from the introductory page by Diane Apostolus-Cappadona, “[T]he worldview senses the aesthetic dimensions of religion, a sacramental understanding of matter, and places an aesthetic and spiritual importance on light” (Eliade and Apostolus-Cappadona, 1992: xii).
This concept and innovative idea, helped to make the possible connections with the primordial sound and even make the space itself be in communion with our existence. Therefore, the effect that the sound AUM in the first track had on me, could now be transposed into another form in space and experienced once again.

**Scene I – The Descent (Jaya Jaya Suravarpoojita Jitdanavkalabha)**

Scene 1 flowed continuously from the opening scene. The following program note detailed this connection and the performance began with these described concepts.

**The program text:**

In the beginning was emptiness, silence, *Akash* / Space, where all matter originated. Then there was energy, throb and pulsating. Emerging from the energy was the word and the word took form...Aum. The throb that initiated the *Omkar* that looked like an elephant face...Ganesha...
The elements gathered and combined into infinite permutations. The basic particles of this cosmos moved like a serpent. In Hinduism, the metaphor of serpentine motion is also used to describe the process of enlightenment of an individual’s soul.

Scene 1, commences with bodies rippling in the movement of the symbolic serpentine motion – pulsating to the resonating sounds of trumpets that are reminiscent of Lord Ganesha’s Aum. In Him is the macrocosm; in Him is the microcosm. As the scene reaches its crescendo, the dancers explode into formation resembling atoms at the Big Bang, eventually coming to rest in the harmonious knowledge that all things began with the cosmic energy…the sound Aum. Thus, he is known as the Lord of the Universe, Vishwa Vinayaka.

**Concept Implementation**

To initiate the idea of “opening”, four diagonal fabrics were also used in scene 1. The four fabrics represented a continuous symbolic formation of the ‘interlocking spiral’ design, which I have explained in the opening scene. As the music resonated, the fabric was also raised from the floor level. Eventually, it created an apex, forming the shape of a pyramid (within this form, I envisage the creative force taking place-the *bindu*).\(^{15}\)

The fabrics also represented the cosmic motion, intertwining with the dancers’ motion within the space. The idea of the fabric and the dancers moving within it was to symbolise the cosmic creation taking shape, the Big Bang and the creation of the universe. The Image 6 shows this motion.

\(^{15}\) The *bindu*, as I have mentioned in Chapter 2, pp 23, 60 and 61, represents the central or source of energy that binds every creative movement that subsequently, produces various forms in space.
In this space, the fabrics were not perceived in a literal form, but symbolised divine energy in motion and thus reemphasised the notion of the formless. In order to visually magnify the concept of creation and the Big Bang theory, projection images were synchronised with the motion-taking place in the foreground.

Therefore, the creative motion by the dancers, the fabric and the projection images should be seen as a single, harmonised form. In fact, such integration not only creates deeper meanings to the dance, but also enhances the audience’s perspective of performance experience.

In order to highlight the scene as “The Descent”, from where all motion and all creation took form, Lord Ganesha was visually presented. He was gradually presented as descending from above, so as to reemphasise that the whole universe began with His form, the Aum. Moreover, to highlight the Lord as seating on a lotus, the dancers
formed shapes of lotus to welcome his descent (Image 7 and DVD). This was also intended to stress the lotus symbol as the “highest form” and is an icon of “illumination” (refer chapter 2, pp. 10-12). Further, lighting design was used to highlight Lord Ganesha as the divine light, illuminating the space (Image 7 and refer to DVD).

Image 7 – Ganesha Descent with dancers creating lotus formation and the ‘illuminating light.’

**Scene II – Grandeur (Pranamyā Shirasa Devam)**

**The program text:**

“Salutations to the Lord whose abode is the crown of my head”, Pranayam Shirasa Devam or Scene II is based on the ancient composition written by the great sage Shree Narada Muni. The text amongst other things foretells Lord Ganesha as the embodiment of wisdom, wherein ego is quelled.
This popular Sanskrit verse is often recited by those who seek assistance to overcome the difficulties and obstacles to attain knowledge and wisdom. Set to a soothing melody, this verse quite literally depicts the twelve most recognisable representation of Ganesha. These include respectively: the elephant-trunked one; the single-tusked one; the red-eyed one; the four head giver of knowledge and possessor of the round belly encompassing the universe; the defender against evil; the remover of obstacles; the thought provoker; the illuminating one; the great leader; the ruler of the underworld and possessor of the elephantine wisdom.

**Concept implementation**

The second scene began with Sage Narada proclaiming the grandeur of Lord Ganesha. This was followed by his teaching the people of the world, from the young ones to the elders, the twelve most significant forms of Lord Ganesha.

The scene was choreographed with twelve elephant-face masked children representing the twelve forms of Ganesha. In order to highlight the teachings of the Sanskrit verses (wisdom) that were received by the learned ones, eight Brahmin couples were also introduced. In addition, the main dancers depicted the various expressive modes of the lyrics and music.

However, to emphasise the expressions of the lyrics and to connect the visualised form of Ganesha as putran / child, in the minds of the young seekers, an image was projected. This image was synchronised with the dance formation that was happening in the foreground. The image was proportionally created to present the effect of sage Narada and the young seekers contemplating on Ganesha’s form. It symbolises the
integration of forms in space that are ideally reflected as an extended expression of the dance in a holistic manner (Image 8).

Image 8 – Lord Ganesha (as child) integrated with the dance

In the same scene, the dancers created movements to form the formation of a *mandala*. In the centre of the *mandala*, an individual dancer struck the pose of Ganesha. Circling around him were all the seekers of wisdom. The twelve forms of Ganesha’s were also presented in a background formation at a higher level (Image 9). This was to denote their significance to all those who seek Lord Ganesha in his various forms (refer to DVD).
Nonetheless, to emphasise the idea of receiving the wisdom from Lord Ganesha, a descending image of Ganesha was projected. The projected image showed the various symbolic icons that Ganesha holds as a guiding weapon for acquiring wisdom, by removing the veil of ignorance (Image 9).

Subsequently, to accentuate the concept of Ganesha as resembling a *mandala*, an image of the Ganesha *yantra* / mystic diagram was also superimposed over the projected image (Image 10). These projections were also created to reflect the corresponding dance movements of *mandala* taking shape in the forefront. The two mediums (the dance and the projected image), were perceived as parallel interactive forms.
Indeed, the idea of generating these designs was to magnify the expressive process that is conceived in the dancer’s mind. As a dancer, I visualise the image of Ganesha’s projection as approving the receipt of the knowledge by the seekers. Further, Ganesha’s *mandala* image represents the seekers’ journey towards the inner chamber: “where all ‘creation and transformation’ is absorbed back into his form” and perceived as “spiritual upliftment” (refer to chapter 1, p. 53-54).

**Scene III – Obeisance (Ganeshaya Deemahi)**

**The program text:**

This scene celebrates the universal and inter-cultural themes that constitute Ganesha as the elephant-headed God found in many places throughout the world. It represents the many impressions of Lord Ganesha adored by different cultures.
Deemahi…I meditate upon you Oh lord… Thou who art endowed with thousand of attributes… Thou who multiplied in thousands of cultures around the world… Thou the great Vishwa Vinayaka…

From early Hindu (Indo-Aryan) origins in Northern India, the philosophy and iconography of Ganesha is said to have spread to Ancient Greece in the form of the pagan deity Janus, contemporised into the Roman God and the subsequently calendar month January to signify a propitious start to any new event. Lord Ganesha iconography is popularly believed to have spread throughout South, South East and East Asia and, eventually, also to Latin America and Spain in the form of the deity, Virakosa.16

Thy names are many both Known and common…Thou art the Guru, Thou are Krishna, Thou art the Gita, Thou are Gowri’s baby, Thou art the King of Obstacles as well as the remover of Obstacles…Thou art seen in the Classical as well as Contemporary, and Abstract…

**Concept Implementation**

To project Lord Ganesha’s various forms across a diverse multicultural landscape, this scene was created to include an eclectic mix of dance styles, including Greek folk dance, Spanish, Irish and Western ballet. Together with these dance forms, various elements of design were also integrated to enhance the diverse cultural connotations that are associated to Lord Ganesha.

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In the performance, as the narration was read for scene III, various forms of Lord Ganesha were presented. This was created by designs that illuminated the outlined abstract forms of Ganesha. These created forms were suspended in performance space (Image 11). Each form designed as light-box was gradually illuminated at various space-times during the narration.

Image 11 – Abstract Designs of Lord Ganesha, suspended as light-boxes in performance space

The lighted-box Ganesha, symbolically represented his diverse forms found throughout the world. The light within the abstract design was also intended to highlight the concept of “illumination”, when one is in communion with the divine form. Through the symbolic forms, the light within is “revealed” (as mentioned in Chapter 1, p. 11 and 20). In this particular moment, it was the abstract design of Ganesha that was experienced by the audience. Even though there were no dancers in the performance space during the narration, the design managed to “sculpt” the space
and created another experience in the audience. Hence, narration combined with design was able to engage the audience into experiencing the performance differently. During the dance performance in scene III, there were also conceptual designs that were applied as projected images. These projected designs were created in accordance with the dance lyrics and its meanings. They were also created to symbolically represent the inner significance of Lord Ganesha. Every design component was carefully executed to create the ultimate experience of the performance.

For example, the image of Ganesha’s face was magnified to accentuate him as the King of the *ganas* / a troop of demigods or attendants.\(^{17}\) The image also emphasised the lyrics, which denoted his form as one tusked with a twisted trunk (Image 12).

\[\text{Image 12- Lord Ganesha as one tusked and with a twisted trunk}\]

The projection was also designed to visually create the effect of the dancers being set forward by Lord Ganesha, himself. It was as though they descend from the projected image. While designing these images, I visualised how as a dancer I would react to his commands. The choreography was formulated with these concepts in mind. It was designed to create Lord Ganesha as the macrocosm and microcosm. To highlight these concepts, the choreography also included the positioning of the dancer-character, Lord Ganesha, on the top platform. It was created to visually enhance the experience of watching the real and the unreal, the micro and the macro, and the power of Lord Ganesha as the chieftain (refer to DVD).

In another section of the scene, a spectrum of blue colour was introduced as a background effect. This was presented in synchronisation with the lyrics that describe Lord Ganesha as resembling the characteristics of Lord Krishna. The colour blue is often used to symbolise Lord Krishna and, this was visually presented in the lighting design (Image 13).
In order to accentuate the idea of “divine glow” and to enhance the performance aesthetic, the projection of a circling halo was superimposed onto the blue background. The dancer-character as Lord Ganesha who posed as Lord Krishna, and surrounded by other dancers with the visual background as projection, was able to portray the meaning in a holistic form. Together, they created a panoramic visual experience for the audience (refer to DVD).

**Scene IV – Revelation (Ganapathi Atharvashirsa)**

**The program text:**

This scene deeply reflects the verses from the Vedic text *Ganapathi Atharvashirsa Upanishad*. The Vedas were revealed to the Rishis (sages); they saw the Mantras. They saw God within and without. They were seers. Past, Present and Future were contained in their mind’s eye. One such Rishi was Ganaka Rishi, who was identical to the Lord Himself and to Him was revealed the sacred Hymn.

The celebrated *Atharvashirsa Upanishad* hymn is popular amongst the devotees of Lord Ganesha and gained superiority over several other celebrated *Upanishadic* prayers. The text endeavours to impel one to re-evaluate one’s deepest senses and metaphysical constitutions to realise the union with Ganesha and by implication, the hymn as cosmic flow.

Thou the abstract Lord in the form of the sacred hymns and represented in the form of sacred letters. Thou represent the triple process of creation, preservation and destruction. In thee, we find all the Gods and the five Elements. Thou art beyond the three stages of Waking, Dreaming and Deep Sleep, and beyond the three bodies;
Gross, Subtle and Causal. Thou art the symbol of inner wisdom. In thee, we find the revelation.

**Concept Implementation**

The scene commenced with an invocation to Lord Ganesha as the universal protector. The scene was set within the background of a jungle backdrop. Seven sages, known as the Sapta Rishis, were in yogic posture and meditated upon the Lord. Their position on the raised platform emphasised them as “high sages.” In the centre of the stage, a huge pyramid structure occupied the space. It was presented as *yantra* for contemplation, as the central icon (I have discussed this as “movement towards the unconscious” and as “penetrating vision” in Chapter 1, p.54). Therefore, the dance choreography was set in relation to this central icon.

In order to create the sense of ritual contemplation, the choreography also included the presentation of naked fire as a ritual element. The sages and the “dancers as seekers” all danced in obeisance to this central pyramid icon (Image 14).
During the conceptual stages of the *Vishwa Vinayaka* performance, I reflected on the word “revelation” and “contemplation.” To direct the viewers’ minds (in this case, those of the audience and the dancers) into a central space for concentration, I envisage the design of a pyramid as a focal point. The pyramid was chosen as a design concept to emphasise its importance as “highest point of spiritual attainment” (Fontana, 1993: 59).\(^\text{18}\) Through this symbolic form, I envisaged a transformation taking place, where the invisible is seen through the visible.

\(^{18}\) I purposely chose the four-sided pyramid instead of three sided to represent the four faces of the ancient Vedas. The four Vedas, known as the Hindu ancient text of wisdom is the *Sama Veda*, *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. In fact, it is also mentioned that Lord Ganesha’s four arms represents the four Vedas (Lal, 1991: 56).
At a particular moment in the *Vishwa Vinayaka* music, the effect created a sense that something fresh was going to be revealed. I visualised this as the opening of the pyramid into the form of a lotus. I envisaged the transformation of the pyramid into a form of a lotus, as representing the transformation of matter to wisdom. The lotus icon is often considered and signified as a representation of enlightenment. In order to highlight the state of “revelation”, the pyramid was intentionally opened to reveal the form that is within the symbolic icon. Hence, the formless is revealed through the form (Image 15).

![Image 15 – Pyramid transformed as lotus (Ganesha within)](image-url)
In the same scene, five fabrics painted with abstract designs were presented in the performance space to accentuate the five elements in a visual manner. The orientation of the five fabrics was created as rays, in order to signify the five elements as rays of energy. Within this space, the Gods of elements were also introduced. The dancers held hand-made masks that represented the different Gods and moved in a stylised choreographed way. Having created this space (design and dancers), Sage Ganaka (as mentioned earlier) ritually danced and moved in space to create the symbolic letter that reflected Lord Ganesha’s inner meanings.

Moreover, to further enhance these symbolic dimensions, images of the letters creating mystic form were projected onto the screen. The movement of the dancer (Sage Ganaka) and the movement of the mantra letter interacted to reveal their interconnectedness (Image 16).
Chapter 5

In addition, to highlight the concept of Sage Ganaka as experiencing the form of Lord Ganesha and becoming one with the Lord, a projection image representing “absorption” was used. In the appropriate space-time of the music, the dancer (Sage Ganaka) was absorbed into the cosmic space and in his space, Lord Ganesha appeared (refer to DVD).

**Scene V – Episodes (Ganesha Chalisa)**

**The program text:**

There are many stories relating to the birth of Lord Ganesha. The *Ganesha Chalisa* is a mythology that details the life of Ganesha. It was composed by the great saint and philosopher, Saint Tulsidas, who is also known as Ramsundar Das.

Ganesha was conceived immaculately by Mother Parvathi, first as a Brahmin, a Twice Born (this form is seen in ancient Greece as Janus the Twin headed God. It is believed by the Greeks that Janus was the Primal God and was to be worshipped first. Hence, we have the concept of JANUary as the first Month of the Year).

Mother Parvathi serves Ganesha as a guest and He in turn, pleased with her hospitality grants her heart’s wish of having a son. There is much merriment in Kailash, and Shiva and Parvati give presents to everyone. Among the guest present is Shani, the unfavourable planet. There is so much commotion and Shani hesitates to see the newborn baby. Parvati despite dissuasions from Shani persuades Him to behold Her lovely son. Shani’s fiery glance severs the head of the baby and there is much pandemonium. Parvathi is inconsolable. Mahavishnu hurls His Sudarshana (Discus) and beheads the first living creature, which is an elephant. Lord Shiva recites
the Prana Mantra (mantra for breath) and replaces His son’s head - pronouncing that Ganesha should be worshipped first.

Shiva then conducts a contest of wisdom between Ganesha and his brother Karthik, saying that whomsoever circumnavigates the earth first is indeed the wise one. Karthik immediately flew off on his peacock into the external world of matter, while wise Ganesha ascended His mouse and circled His parents who symbolise the Yin and Yang, the two energies of the Universe. Thus, Ganesha is acclaimed as the wisest.

**Concept Implementation**

In order to enhance the performance experience, the performance space for this scene was set differently. It included a representation of Mount Kailash and a centrally raised platform (Image 17).

![Image 17 – Set Design incorporating Mount Kailash with Central Dias on centre stage](image-url)
The centre platform was designed, first, to visualise the circle as the representation of the macrocosm.\textsuperscript{19} Within the circle the main characters, Shiva, Parvathi, Ganesha, and Karthik executed their dance expressions. The raised circular platform was also designed to create a sense of divine space. It also visually enhanced the perspective view of the audience.

In this scene, the choreography also included dance movement and expression in a unique combination by twenty dancers besides the main characters on stage. Their dance sequences were composed as an extended expression of the main characters. They danced around the centre circle, and interacted and responded to the expressions of the main characters. A beam of light was continuously presented in the centre space to accentuate the main dancers’ expressions and highlight the beam of light as a space in a “higher plane.”

In order for the audience to understand and experience the performance in a different manner, images as projection were used to symbolise certain aspects of the meanings in the dance. For example, the entry of the character Shani, the unfavourable planet, is equated to the planet Saturn.\textsuperscript{20} Since this has to be understood and experienced, an image of the planet Saturn was projected in the background. The projection conceived and designed as part of the performance, immediately highlighted the relationship between the character, Shani, and the image projected, Saturn (Picture 18)

\textsuperscript{19} It is believed that in many cultures, the cosmos is separated into two different spaces. David Fontana says that “The heavens were the home of the gods and higher powers, were associated with spirit and intellect, while the earth was the place of matter and physicality. The organization of the earthly realm (microcosm) was held to mirror that of the heavens (macrocosm)” (Fontana, 1993:34).

\textsuperscript{20} In the Hindu science of astrology, Shani is considered an inauspicious planet and quite tough and powerful. Hence, when it is in its adversely affecting phase, it harms its subjects, but contrarily in its favourable phase it as tremendously uplifts them. Shani is typically described as the bringer of grief and misery in life.
In another situation in the scene, I wanted the audience to perceive my character of Shiva emerging and descending from Mount Kailash. While he stood in the centre of the upper platform, a projection of Mount Kailash was initiated in the background. In fact, the main characters used this platform to enter the circular space. The upper level platform enhanced the performance experience by emphasising the descending of the Gods (refer to DVD).

The high raised platform was also designed to highlight other expressive modes in the scene. When the character Lord Vishnu moved across the stage, twenty dancers formed a huge wing of Garuda / Mythical bird, which is considered as Vishnu’s vehicle on the raised platform. They created movements to accentuate the ‘flying.’ Images of moving clouds were also projected to enhance the foreground dance expressions (Image 19).

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21 Mount Kailash is associated with Lord Shiva. To the Hindus, it is believed that it is in Mount Kailash that Lord Shiva resides.
The background lighting design emphasised the idea of sky, as well as reflected the concept of colour blue, the characteristic colour of Lord Vishnu (I have discussed how colour as symbolic form is used as light and associates with the symbolic characteristic of Gods – chapter 1, p.51 and 52).

Scene VI – Immersion (Sukhkarta Dukhaharta)

The program text:

The sixth scene of Vishwa Vinayaka transports the audience to the pomp, pageantry and colour of the renowned annual Ganesha Chaturthi festival. This scene is also known as Visarjan, translated as “immersion.” In this festival, after days of considerable prayers, clay sculptures of Ganesha are carried in a long procession and, eventually, immersed into the river, sea, ocean or lake.
The immersion signifies the reverent return of Ganesha to his elemental form. The scale of this event ranges from small family celebrations to city wide festivals that involve millions of people carrying images of Ganesha, with some moulded over sixty feet high. The grand Visarjan ceremony denotes: “He who has manifested himself as this world and earth, once again dissolves into himself as the spirit of the universe.”

**Concept Implementation**

In order to capture the essence of the festival and to celebrate its significance, the scene began with dancers moving in the form of an elephant. These dance movements also expressed the many abstract forms of Lord Ganesha.

The raised rear platform was used to enhance dance movement that resembled to the festival procession. The procession scene was also amplified by introducing projection images that highlighted the grandeur of the celebration / festival. Hand held lights were also designed to create various light movements that formed a *mandala* pattern. Within the *mandala*, Lord Ganesha also danced. To emphasise the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi, when the moon during this time is in the shape of crescent, the design of Ganesha sitting on the crescent moon was introduced within the performance space (Image 20).

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22 With regards to the Visarjan ceremony, Paul B. Courtright writes that “The life of the image moves from formless clay to iconographic representation to animation and empowerment to dispersion and return to formlessness. In this respect it replicates the cosmos itself (Courtright, 2001: 186).
The idea of immersing the Ganesha statues as is done in India was also highlighted. This was performed by using different grades of blue fabric to symbolise the element of water and waves. Projection images of waves also accentuated the whole idea of the immersion ceremony. Furthermore, dancers carried small statues of Ganesha to present and highlight the celebration and, finally, to symbolically immerse Ganesha into the water (refer to DVD).

**Scene VII – The Ascent**

This scene was created to emphasise the concept of the return to the beginning. It highlighted the cosmic creation that takes place at all times. Through the symbol of Lord Ganesha, the mortal world is able to experience his form – the micro and the macro.
In order to continuously stress the idea of form and formless and to signify this as characteristics of the cosmos itself, the final scene re-emphasised the notion of AUM. This is conceptualised as that which is created is eventually absorbed into space once again. In the scene when Lord Ganesha’s ascent was synchronised with the oscillation of the sound AUM fading into silence, it recaptured the essence of the formless.

**Concept Implementation**

The ascending scene of Lord Ganesha into space was created to integrate with the projected images. In order to visually enhance the performance, a cut-out of Lord Ganesha was placed as seating on a throne. The choreography was created to symbolize the concepts of Indian art and architecture, where Ganesha was centrally positioned within, to form these concepts.

The dancers formed the basic formation of a *mandala* with several concentric circles and, ultimately, merged into the form of Ganesha in the centre. This formation denoted the concept of the *mandala* as representing the cosmos. To further develop this idea, the dancers moved to create layers of lotus petals (refer to concept of lotus as cosmic energy, chapter 1), (Image 21).

As the lotus was formed, Lord Ganesha was also raised. This was synchronised with the music. In order to emphasise the “peak” where the form and the formless are conceived as one, the dancers created a form resembling the concepts of Meru, the “cosmic mountain” as the “centre or “navel” of the universe” (Michell, 1977: 22 & 69). The dance movement with the design was conceived as “one choreographic form” to highlight the “ascent.”
In the end, as Lord Ganesha ascended, a beam of light projected from Lord Ganesha, illuminated the performance space. This was to emphasise the idea of light as a divine form that emerges from him, where the light is seen as a reflection of his form. Hence, all these ideas integrated as one, finally, portrayed *Vishwa Vinayaka* that can be conceived as the light of “illumination.”

**Audience Responses**

I used two methods to collect feedback on the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka*. I conducted live interviews (camera and audio cassette) and distributed questionnaires. These were aimed at audience members as well as the performers. The aim of the interviews was to observe how design and dance had affected the audience. It was also to study how the integrated mediums (design and dancers’ bodies) had enhanced
the performance experience. It was a means to understand the impact and the links within the performance, rather than as a means of evaluation.

The feedback that I received can be considered in four parts. The first part discusses the responses of the initiated audience, the second discusses those of the uninitiated audience, the third considers the audience’s physical perspective of the performance and the fourth the responses from the performers.23

The initiated audience members and audience who understood certain aspects of the production, found the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka* very interesting. These audience members felt that the design elements combined with the dance, captured expressions that otherwise not seen in normal Indian dance theatre. For this audience, the theatrical elements not only enhanced the performance experience, but also brought depth to the music and text. From the comments it was noted that this audience was able to engage in the performance much more with the highlighted design enhancements. They saw the design as part of creating the whole performance experience.

The second group of audience members, who were not familiar with the idea of Indian dance and the concepts of Lord Ganesha, experienced the performance in a different way. For them, the design components in the dance enabled them to understand the performance. Since they had difficulty following the dance expressions and gestures, the design helped them bridged this gap. Audience members who did not know anything about the dance and about the concept of Lord Ganesha managed to experience the dance journey through the design mediums that

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23 The initiated audiences are those who are familiar with the concepts, stories and representations that are portrayed in a dance performance. The uninitiated audiences are those who do not have any knowledge or have little knowledge on the subject presented.
related to the narration and script. One audience member said, “I don’t know anything about Indian dance, but the design elements such as the projection images made me understand the Indian dance better. It created an uplifting experience.” Another audience member said, “As I have been listening to the Vishwa Vinayaka music for the last couple of months, the dance performance truly brought out the elements of music in a visual form. It was a total theatrical experience.”

However, the experiences of watching the performance of Vishwa Vinayaka were also affected by where a person viewed the stage performance in relation to the auditorium space. One audience member said, “Since I was seating in the upper gallery of the auditorium, I was not able to experience the performance in totality. I was able to see the dancers, but was not able to see how they interacted with design elements, especially the projection images.” “However, the view from above captured how different forms of lighting created interesting patterns on stage. The view also allowed me to experience the various formations that were presented in the dance. It made connections to the dance meanings.”

Audience members who sat close to the stage were able to capture the experience of emotions and energy bursting out from the dancers. Since they were very close to the stage, they at times concentrated only on a single dancer or on a single object. However, they also managed to experience the performance from a wider angle when the performers danced up stage / closer to the rear. These various viewing experience also affected the way the performance was experienced.

Nonetheless, to many audiences, the performance of Vishwa Vinayaka was experienced as a combination of classical, contemporary and modern approaches. Even though Vishwa Vinayaka was performed and choreographed in that manner, it
was able to create the essence of Indian dance theatre – a spiritual experience for the audiences. This was clearly stated in the questionnaires and interviews that were conducted at the end of the performance.

As for the dancers, the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka* was a challenging one. Due to its concepts that also emphasised on design elements, there was always a physical and mental engagement that the dancers have to encounter with designs in such production. One performer said, “The symbolic designs allowed me to understand the inner meanings of Ganesha’s concepts and, therefore, enhanced my own performance.” Another performer said, “We are so used to express Indian dance through bodily expression, but interacting the expression with design elements made it more visually appealing.” “It made me think of how as a dancer, my movements fit into the bigger picture to highlight the concepts of *Vishwa Vinayaka.*”

**Conclusion**

The production of *Vishwa Vinayaka* was created to incorporate various theatrical medium that integrated with the dance and the dancer’s body. In particular, the music composition played an important part in stimulating concepts and ideas that enhanced the performance experience.

Various design forms were created to convey the different forms that are attributed to Lord Ganesha. These were also designed to communicate the many underlying meanings within the performance text and music. Together with the design forms, various spaces were also created to express the different realm that is expressed in the dance. This was done by introducing other forms into the space at specific moments.
or by using fixed settings. Moreover, to further develop concepts that simultaneously become part of the dance / dancers’ emotions and expressions, images were projected to extend these inner dimensions. The design elements were always considered as united whole to the dance form.

In fact, the dance production of *Vishwa Vinayaka* was constantly conceived as a performance that created a ‘panoramic’ view. Each theatrical element merged with the dance and the dancer. Both the design and the dance were conceived as amalgamated form and space, integrated to highlight the performance experience in its totality. Therefore, dance and design elements in the performance of *Vishwa Vinayaka* were never seen in isolation, but merged as symbolic and aesthetic expression in the performance space to be experienced by the performer and the audience. The design therefore, added another dimension to the theme of Lord Ganseha and hence performance experiences were enhanced through the process of integration.
CHAPTER 6: CASE STUDY 2 - KASHI FLOATING STAGE AND PERFORMANCE

Introduction

In many ways, the case study on the project of Kashi floating stage and performance varies from that of the case study on *Vishwa Vinayaka* dance production. It varies in its purpose, space, audience and, most importantly, in its contribution to the community. It is considered as unique experience for many participants, local and overseas.

In contrast to the *Vishwa Vinayaka* case study, the Kashi production did not allow for further follow up experiments and enhancements. This case study was unique; it was not replicable, and was done for a specific reason and at a particular time of the year. Notably, this case study is not perceived as a normal performance or a production presentation. It is beyond what is normally experienced in the modern, contemporary or even outdoor theatres.

In fact, every aspect of the Kashi event was conceived and implemented in a very different approach. It constituted the understanding of the specific event and the space of the special occasion. This event was treated very differently as compared to the production of *Vishwa Vinayaka*. Principally, as Richard Schechner says, it was beyond any form of entertainment (Schechner, 1985); rather it was closely related to ritual and sacredness (ibid).

Unlike the production of *Vishwa Vinayaka*, the experiments and enhancements created for the Kashi floating theatre were inspired by my experiences encountered within the specific Kashi space. In the case of *Vishwa Vinayaka*, the ‘music and the
lyrics’ initiated the concepts and designs for performance enhancements. The project in Kashi was prompted by its architectural landscape, the concept and historical background, and the special festival of MahaShivarathri, ordained to Lord Shiva. Therefore, in order to understand how the design of the floating stage and specific dance performances were created, it is crucial to address the inspirations that ultimately initiated the design and dance concepts in Kashi.

To address these issues, the chapter is divided into six sections. In the first section, I will describe the experiences of my journey to this place. The next section will focus on the significance of Kashi. In section three, I will explain the importance of the MahaShivarathri festival in reverence to Lord Shiva. The fourth section of the chapter will address the various designed concepts that were inspired from my being in the Kashi space. Following that, section five will discuss the performance of Bhill dance, the tribal dance of the hunters that took place on the floating stage. Finally, in section six, I will discuss on the various responses from the audiences and the performers who were involved in the event of the Kashi floating stage.

These discussions will highlight the reasons for embracing the Kashi experiences and explain how these experiences prompted the development of the floating stage. Hence, the study will also allow me to show how the performers and the audience were affected by its creation and how dance performances were further enhanced in this created space.

The Journey

Compared to the various experiences of producing the dance production of Vishwa Vinayaka, the experiences of creating the floating stage and dance performances in
Kashi were very different. The creative force in *Vishwa Vinayaka* was in response to the captivating music composed by Atul and Ajay Gokawale. In the case of Kashi event, however, the initial driving force came from my association with a spiritual guru, His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati. It was his idea to create an event within the banks of river Ganges in Kashi; where the unique confluence of Vedic chanting, ritual ceremonies and performing arts are all carried out as a *sadhana*, or spiritual undertaking.\(^1\)

I found the experience of being commissioned by the spiritual guru to create a performance space in the river Ganges was overwhelming. Taking on such a project was by no means similar to undertaking dance projects that are confined within an available space. The event in Kashi was not only challenging, but also more than that; I saw it as an offering to the spiritual guru and to the sacred land of Lord Shiva. Therefore, I considered creating the floating stage and performances in Kashi to be a unique personal experience.

Having arrived in the city of Varanasi, I had to take the auto-riksha; - a three-wheeled motorcycle modified as passenger transport vehicle. On reaching the vicinity of the sacred place where the event was to take place, I had to walk down narrow alleys to get to the actual location. The narrow passageways were structured and composed of old buildings of different levels that are attached to each other and run parallel on both sides of the narrow lanes.

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\(^1\) Knowledgeable priests and scholars from all over India performed the chanting and ritual presentations. The performances on the floating stage comprised of great artists from all over India including artist from Kashi. On some of the festival days, performers from the Temple of Fine Arts International also took part in the grand celebration that took place on the Kashi floating stage (refer Appendix 1).
Walking along such alleys reminded me of the ancient methods of building the road with large cobblestones arranged in a systematic way. Out on the main road, the day looked bright and pleasant, but walking along these pathways, I felt as if I was in a jigsaw puzzle wondering where the narrow lane would take me. The cramped nature of the buildings and the countless activities along the pathway made the space seem much darker. This experience can be similarly quoted to the experience of Mark Twain. As a writer, he described the Kashi space as, “[Kashi] is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together” (in Eck, 1982: 5). His observation and expression of Kashi, I believe, is still valid today.

I was thrilled at the way every living being and creature had its own space even in the midst of the crowded lanes, and they all seemed comfortable in close contact with each other. There seemed to be a strong bonding of human space with architectural space.

The architecture of the space and the way the alleys were built brought a sense of unity and harmony to this living space. Along the alleys, there were also several temples, small and large ones, each propagating its own deity. The alleys, the buildings, the temples, the people, the animals, and the activities, all seemed to be engaged in a divine play.

Towards the end of the stroll, I reached a tunnel-like structure in between the cramped buildings. From this point, I could see bright lights at the other end of the tunnel. On reaching the other end of the tunnel, I was overwhelmed by the vastness of the space. It was like being in a temple space and, finally, arriving at the inner
chamber and being greeted by the divine presence. The whole space in front of me was like witnessing a divine presence everywhere; it was the presence of the beautiful ever flowing mother Ganges\(^2\).

On arrival at the edge of the tunnel, there were several concrete steps leading down to the river Ganges. These steps are known as *Ghats*. From where I was standing, the descending steps to the river Ganges resembled the space of an amphitheatre. Along the Ghats, there were many activities. It was a space where tourists, vendors, martial arts and yoga practitioners gathered and people washed clothes, all in the same space.

It is also a place where people continuously cremate dead bodies. It is along the Ghats that one finds many different temples and *ashrams*.\(^3\) The whole space along the Ghats at specific times of the day resonates with the sounds of the temple bells. In this space, every activity of life is perceived as an action that is divinely ordained within Lord Shiva’s abode (Sherring, 2001: 41-44).

As I sat on the Ghats and contemplated on the immediate space in front of me, I felt my presence being connected to the past and present. I felt the whole space moving back and forth from present to past and vice-versa. Every activity in that space seemed to have a continuous link from the past to the present.

The whole space seemed to be an on-going process of life: the living and the dead all existing simultaneously in time and space. Immediately, this experience connected me to the ideology of the dancing Shiva-Nataraja. In his cosmic dance, every motion

\(^2\) The Ganges is considered as the divine mother providing food and blessings along her gracious way from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. The Ganges to the Hindus is also considered as the Goddess. In Sanskrit it is known as *Ganga* (Muller, 2002:121).

\(^3\) *Ashram* or spell as *asram* is considered a hermitage. The word literally means “a place for self-mortification” but, it is usually referred to the idea of a centre or residence for spiritual retreat (Farquhar, 1971:249).
in the universe is created and destroyed in a constant flow of time and space. His is the dance of the universe. In his dance, transformation takes place (refer, chapter 1, section on Lord Nataraja). Similarly, in the space along the Kashi Ghats, there is constant tangible and intangible transformation taking place, bearing upon the material and spiritual.

In fact, Lord Shiva is also directly associated with the concept of the Kashi space. It is in this space that Lord Shiva is acclaimed as giving moksha or liberation to all who seek refuge in him. The following section describes the concept of Kashi as one of the most ancient and sacred space to the Hindus.

**The Sacred Kashi Space**

Kashi is also popularly known as Varanasi or Banaras. The city, which is distinguished by the river Varuna in the North and the river Assi in the South, came to be known because of these two rivers, hence, its name Varanasi. The name Banaras is believed to have been derived from the word Varanasi, which was spelt as Baranasi in *Pali* language. Ultimately, it was called as Banaras, which is derived from the Sanskrit name “Varanasi.”

However, Kashi seems to be the more relevant and auspicious name used by many scholars, as well as pilgrims, who consider it as something beyond this world. This special proclamation is represented in Image 1, which shows Kashi sitting atop Lord Shiva’s trident. It is said that the trident represents the “three hills on which [Kashi]
lies or as three worlds: the netherworld, the world of human life and death, and heaven above” (Gesler and Pierce, 2000: 225).

According to some scholars, Kashi has always been described as that which represents the cosmic space. Therefore, the entire Kashi space is considered to be a celestial city, which Eck refers to as the “cosmic diagram” (Eck, 1982). This concept also attributes Kashi as being the model of a *mandala*. This sacred space, which is considered to resemble the form of a *mandala*, is described as “a sacred circle that represents the entire universe, its powers, its interrelations, and its grounding center” (ibid: 146).

Thus, the city itself is a part of pilgrimage circumambulation. Pilgrims who visit Kashi walk in a clockwise direction, visiting shrines and temples and focusing on

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their journey within the divine space. The pilgrimage movement around Kashi suggests a huge geometric pattern in motion. When such space is conceived and practiced in that manner, Saraswati says it is a complete formation:

...a pilgrimage visiting Kashi-ksetra gets the feeling that he has moved into the boundless cosmic space in all its direction, all its constellation, planets and stars and Gods through the six seasons, driven in the solar car.

(Saraswati, 2004: 67)

Kashi is not only visualised in the form of cosmic space, it is also perceived as the “city of light” (Gesler and Pierce, 2000: 222). The word Kashi actually means the “luminous space” (Saraswati, 2004: 62). However, Diana L. Eck expresses the light of Kashi as,

[Kashi] is the embodiment of Shiva, Here, the *linga* of Shiva, phallic symbol of creation, rose from the dark netherworld as a fiery *axis mundi* to pierce the highest heavens. Kashi is not simply the place of that event, it is the event itself. Kashi, embodying the world, is the centre of everything and incorporates all. Kashi is light, and through its brilliance, truth and vision are revealed. The transcendent light of Kashi is the Sada Shiva-Eternal Shiva – or Brahman, the One Ultimate Reality sought fervently by the totality of existence.

(Weightman, 1996: 65-66)

Therefore, the concept of Kashi as light, symbolising the centre of the cosmos, clearly identifies it as a space beyond physical senses where Hindus would visit to receive the blessings of Lord Shiva. It is a place that they visit to cross over to another world. As such, Kashi is considered one of the most important sacred spaces to the Hindus, where the river Ganges flows through the city. Because of its interconnectedness with the sacred river, Kashi is a place where corpses are immersed and where the living deep into the river for salvation. It is a space where “crossing” to another realm becomes the most significant aspect of Kashi. As Eck says,
This flow of life-giving waters which links heaven and earth becomes a means for crossing, for by those waterfall rivers one may cross from earth to the far shore of heaven. The Ganga, for instance, is sometimes called svarga-sopana-sarini, “the flowing ladder to heaven.” Since crossing to the far shore may be a crossing up as well as crossing over, both the image of the ladder (sopana) and that of the bridge (setu) are utilized as symbolic vocabulary of transcendence.

(Eck, 1981: 325)

The various concepts and beliefs of Kashi as a most important pilgrimage space draw millions of people from around the world to it. Moreover, during the month of February, a special festival in adoration of Lord Shiva amplifies the notion of its sacredness. Thus, the festival of MahaShivarathri is considered an important event in the lives of Hindus. More importantly, going on a pilgrimage to Kashi during this festival season is believed to benefit the seekers much more due to the intense ritual and festival mood. This festival, which is ordained to Lord Shiva, is celebrated in various glorious ways in many parts of the world where Hindus reside.

The Event – MahaShivarathri festival

Kashi is a place where Lord Shiva is considered to be residing in every particle within the space. It is said that the pundits declared the space as “kankar kankar me shankar, ‘every pebble of Kashi is God Shankar / [Shiva]’” (Saraswati, 2004: 69). Thus, Lord Shiva is proclaimed as Lord of Kashi. It is here, in the great holy city, that the shrine of Lord Kashi Vishwanath\(^6\) is situated. This temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva.

The event or the festival that is propitiously associated with Lord Shiva is known as “MahaShivarathri.” Literally, this term means ‘the night of Lord Shiva’, and it is

\(^6\) This is another name for Shiva. It means Lord of the universe, whose sanctuary is Kashi.
associated with the waning of the moon. The festival normally takes place between February and March, during the Vedic month of Magha. It is considered a very auspicious night and said to be the night of blessing, salvation and, ultimately, for the seeking of enlightenment.

The origin of the festival has been written in the various Hindu purana texts. According to the myth written in the texts, it is said that

…a hunter clings to bilva tree at night in the jungle for fear of wild animals. There he stays awake all night, and from time to time, lets a few drops of water and few bilva leaves fall – onto a Sivalinga covered with foliage. So, unaware and inadvertently, this lower-caste man worships Siva by fasting, vigil, leaves, and water. This pleases Siva so much that he offers the hunter liberation or place near him. He thus frees the hunter from his profane life limited by death.

(Michaels and Harshav, 2004: 311)

Such is the greatness of Lord Shiva to bestow blessings and liberation for his devotees from this material world. Therefore, everywhere in India during this festival, Shiva is propitiated with all sorts of decorations, offerings and rituals. The grandeur of this festival is also praised in almost every Hindu Scriptures. In the Shiva Purana, the Supreme Lord Himself declares:

No other rite is more beneficial to man than Shiva Ratri. By worshipping Me on Shiva Ratri the devotee attains the fruit that otherwise is only obtainable by constantly worshipping Me for a year. At this time, the virtue of devotion to Me increases like to the tide in the ocean at the rise of the Moon. Assuredly, for the performance of Shiva Ratri, I, Lord Shiva, Destroyer of all miseries, grant both worldly pleasures, Spiritual Salvation and all desired benefits.”

Indeed, in many parts of the world the “night of Shiva” is revered in many different ways. Most significantly, MahaShivarathri is grandly celebrated in the temples
devoted to Lord Shiva, as the main central deity. The festival function and itinerary varies from a simple adoration to a majestic glorification. During the festival, Lord Shiva is adored in his many forms; mainly in the form of ascetic, as Lord of Dance (Nataraja) and as the icon Linga\(^9\). The latter is the most auspicious symbolic form that is celebrated during the festival.

The *MahaShivaratri* celebration, in which I was involved, took place from 17\(^{th}\) February to 28\(^{th}\) February 2003. It was an event that culminates as an offering to Lord Shiva. The festival, which was held for twelve days, included various ritualistic ceremonies, as well as dance and music performances. The rituals were performed during the day in a temporary constructed *mandap* / pavilion and, in the evenings, the floating stage at Kedar Ghats was transformed into a space for music and dance.

In Kashi, the whole city celebrated the auspicious festival. It was not a festival that was only confined within the temple space, as it would be normally the case in many temples within India and around the world. In Kashi, every shop, every street and every person joined in the celebration. The Kashi that I experienced was a theatre; where in every corner of the city, men, women and children from all stages of life united in the grand festivity. It was a union towards the almighty. This is reflected in the writings of Baidyanath Saraswati. He says, “Kashi, the divine theatre”; where the whole activity undertaken by the pilgrims can be considered as the movement “towards the full realization of the innermost spiritual experience” (Saraswati, 2004: 64).

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\(^9\) Shiva is also symbolically presented as *linga* – mentioned as phallus. This form does not literally means a phallus, but referred as symbolic “universal fertility” and can be traced back to the cult and myth of lingam worships (O’Flaherty, 1973: 130 – 135).
In fact, in creating the design concepts for the Kashi floating stage, every idea for me was a spiritual experience. Even though I was aware of the various difficulties in creating the floating stage technically and physically, it was, however, perceived as the creation of a “divine abode.” Therefore, the constraints were never seen or considered as obstacles. The design and construction was undertaken as an offering. In the next section, I will describe how and why various ideas of creating the floating stage were conceptualised, and how all these ideas effectively culminated in a symbolic and aesthetic concept of form and space.

The design of the Floating Stage

As a dancer and a theatre practitioner, conceptualising design and dance for a performance in modern or open theatre space is always challenging. However, in order to create the floating stage in Kashi, I also had to consider various other technical and artistic aspects that normally do not take place in the common auditorium. Here, in Kashi, I had to take into account the water level of the Ganges, the direction of the wind, the size of the stage and the perspective view from the audience. I wanted to create a space that not only served the purpose of the performance, but would also create engagement for performers, audiences and pilgrims alike.

In order to create the floating performance space, a basic floor stage needed to be constructed. This was done by attaching two huge barges together to create the maximum performance space. Once this was fixed, vertical columns, cross beams and intersecting supports were constructed to create the foundation for the stage floor decking (Image 2).
The construction of the basic stage floor took approximately seven days to complete. Once this was completed, the local high priest and pundits consecrated the space (Image 3). This was done, as they believe by sanctifying the new constructed stage space, the event that is to take place in this space will be carried out without any obstacles or any hindrances. The high priest said, “It is to invite the Gods to bless the occasion and see that everything goes on well.”¹⁰ Such space preparation is also clearly specified in the *Natyasastra*. It is said that in order to present the performances without any impediment, various ritual ceremonies are performed prior to the actual theatre performance (Rangacharya, 2003).

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¹⁰ This was personally conveyed by the high priest to all who were present during the ritual ceremony-taking place on the constructed stage.
The process of consecrating the new constructed stage also included the chanting of the Vedic mantras by the pundits. The chanting continued while the stage was gradually rowed to its exact spot along Kedar Ghat. The chanting of the Vedic mantra affected me. It generated powerful vibrating energy in the stage space. It was as though the entire performance space was being shielded by divine power. This can be compared to the ideas of creating space in *Vastusastra*, where the various techniques are used to encase the “breath” or “prana”, the energy, to give life to the constructed space (refer chapter 2, section on space and design).

This experience inspired me to visualise the design of the performance space that would ideally resonate with the concepts of *mandala*. Even though Kashi is conceptualised and perceived in the form of a *mandala*, I felt that there was a need to create a performance space that would visually engage the viewer’s mind. Indeed, the chanting of the mantras, the concept of *mandala*, the various experiences of being in
Kashi and the special occasion of *MahaShivaratri*, all contributed to the various design ideas of creating the Kashi floating stage.

**Various Conceptual Designs**

**Concept one**

The initial idea to design the floating stage was drawn from my experience of seeing the vastness, beauty and significance of the river Ganges. I experienced the Ganges as the “river of wisdom and purity.” For many centuries, the river Ganges has been the source of inspiration for many sages, gurus, artists and for all those who seek a spiritual path. It has also been the living source for all who depended on it and to scientists who are still amazed with its “purity.” Further, the river Ganges is also mentioned in almost every great mythological story of India.

Such greatness of the river Ganges directed my thoughts towards the characteristics of the Goddess Saraswati. She is conceived as the Goddess of wisdom and is symbolised sitting on a swan. The swan is considered as the *vahana* / vehicle of Goddess Saraswati and with her image in white, it represents her as the form of purity.\(^\text{11}\) Therefore, the experience of observing the similarities between the river Ganges and Goddess Saraswati, prompted me to design the floating stage as shown in Image 4.

\(^{11}\) Goddess Saraswati is also referred as the Goddess of learning and the arts. The other name bestowed upon her is *Hamsa-Vahini* which means "she who has a swan as her vehicle"
The idea of the floating stage as the symbolic swan was perceived as the space where wisdom in the form of dance and music is received and presented. Thus, the design space was conceptualised to express the ideology of the symbolic swan. The concept was perceived as a vehicle or pathway to be in communion with the divine.

Within this designed space, the architecture of the wall panels was also included. It was shaped to resemble the royal palace of the swans. However, this concept was not well considered, as I felt that the wall created a barrier against seeing the vastness of space beyond the confines of the performance space. Even though the design of swan reflected the concepts of the Ganges, it did not directly relate to the ideas of *MahaShivaratri*. Hence, I visualised another idea that would possibly create a connection to the occasion.
Concept two

The next idea to design the Kashi floating stage came from my experience of observing the architectural structures that are stretched along the Kashi Ghats. Various buildings and temples designs along the Ghats were planned in the shape of squares, rectangles and as tapering towers. Each of these buildings also had its own Ghats / steps leading to the river Ganges.

While contemplating on these architectural elements, I visualised the shape of a pyramid as the principal design form that is orientated throughout the landscape of the Ghats. The symbol of the pyramid also created a sense of connection between the past and the present – the ancient and the modern. I envisioned the Kashi architecture as similar to that of the ancient architecture of Egypt, where the pyramid designed as staggered steps and, finally, tapering to an infinite point was conceived as an icon in communion with the Supreme divine. This notion appears to be parallel to the architectural layout of the Kashi Ghats. Hence, the concept of the floating stage was designed as shown in Image 5.
In addition, the design of the floating stage as a symbolic pyramid incorporated the form of various shrines that I had observed during my journey to this sacred space. These were represented in the form of assorted pyramids within the large pyramid form. As I see it, the whole of Kashi can be conceptualised as a huge pyramid and, within that space, every activity is perceived as the “divine play” enclosed in the “divine theatre.”

The design also included two pathway ramps. This design was idealised from my engagement with the alley spaces between the buildings. Although there were many narrow lanes within the vicinity of the Kashi Ghats, they all ultimately lead to the river Ganges. Therefore, the designs that I conceptualised encompass the representation of a “pathway” to the supreme performance space.

Even though the design seems to represent Kashi concepts to a certain degree, I did not consider that it symbolized the overall perception that is ordained to Kashi and to the significance of Lord Shiva. Nevertheless, I believe that the idea of the pyramid
and the ramp as constituting a ‘pathway’ towards the divine space can be considered as an important model to the design of the floating stage. These ideas were then further explored and developed to create the ultimate design for the floating stage.

**Concept Three**

In reflecting on the previous designs, I then drew a third idea that I felt was the culmination of the other two. I visualised the performance space as one that encased the sense of wisdom, purity, ascending and finally, the space as divine theatre. In retrospect, I also envisage that the ideal performance space should also emphasise the festive celebration in reverence to Lord Shiva.

In order to create an ideal floating stage, I also reflected on the concepts of Kashi as the “luminous one” and that which is also perceived as the embodiment of Shiva. Hence, Lord Shiva himself can be said to be the light of Kashi. As discussed earlier, Eck expresses this light as the “transcendent light” that symbolises the form of Supreme Brahman in its totality.

Therefore, the subsequent and ultimate design of the Kashi floating stage was created from these various ideas. It represented the concepts of Kashi and the celebration of *MahaShivaratri*. The design shown in Image 6 was finally crystallised as the ideal concept for the Kashi floating stage.
In designing the performance space, I felt that it should also be designed to create an aesthetic experience. In that way, the created space is thought of as space for concentration / contemplation; the space ought to engage the performer and the audience, as well. Therefore, while designing the third possible concept, I envisaged the performance space as the creation of a mandala.

In order to create the space as a representation of a mandala, the design of the floating stage had to include pillars and perimeter arches. All this was created to encase the “energy” or the “prana” within the performance space.

The design of the floating stage was gradually enhanced every three days. Rather than reveal the entire concept at the beginning, I progressively presented the design. Therefore the stage space was gradually transformed from day one to day three. In doing so, I wanted the space to absorb the audience and the participants from time to time. For me, this idea is similar to how an Indian dancer would reveal the ultimate
journey of a particular dance. By executing various emotions and expressions layer by layer, the dancer reveals each meaning of the dance. Finally, when the whole concept of the dance is fully revealed, the dancer and the audiences alike enjoy the ultimate “bliss.”

Hence, the ultimate design of the floating stage was created in three phases. The first, which I mentioned earlier, included the design of the pillars, which comprised four tall pillars and four short pillars. All the pillars were designed as tapering pyramids to mirror the surrounding temple towers in Kashi Ghats. The tall pillars represented the four Vedas. Together, with the other four short pillars, they represented the eight astadikpalas, the guardians of the eight points in space (refer chapter 2, section on Space and Design). Within the pillared space, the dance and music is visualised as the fifth Veda – the Natyaveda. Hence, the whole space now envisioned as containing the five Vedas is considered the creation of “wisdom.”

Further, the eight pillars were also designed to incorporate the representation of Lord Shiva and the concepts of Kashi. Within each pillar, the symbols of damaru (drum), trisula (trident), Aum (Om) and Sarpa Sirsa (Snake's hood) were created. On the adjacent side, various geometrical designs were produced. This symbolised the various sources of conscious energy / nabhi, where Kashi is perceived as the “intersecting geometrical point, the sacred navel.” The detail in Image 7 shows the various symbols that were created on the pillars.
In addition, the pillar was also designed to present its form as the symbol of light. Thus, lights were attached to the inside of the pillars to present Kashi visually as the ‘luminous light.’ During the night, the lighted pillars created the effect of the “symbolic pillars of light.” Further, the effect also highlighted the various symbols, which are engraved within each pillar. Therefore, the lights were designed to project and emphasise the symbolic representation of Kashi and Lord Shiva, the embodiment of “transcendent light” (refer section on Kashi).

The pillars were also designed to visually represent the concept of Kashi sitting atop Lord Shiva’s trident (refer section on Kashi). The pillars were therefore, designed to include the form of a trident atop the pillars. Surrounding the trident, lotus petals were also designed as part of the symbolic pillar. The trident at the top and the lotus were designed to emphasise the idea of Lord Shiva as the lord of “heaven above” and through him “wisdom / enlightenment” is realised.
The first phase of the floating stage design also integrated the design of the stage perimeter arches. These arches were also designed to highlight the different aspects of Kashi, Lord Shiva and the river Ganges. Image 8 shows the various symbols that were designed as part of the floating stage.

Image 8- Perimeter Arch

The design is shaped to symbolise forms of water / waves (Ganges), the sacred ashes / Vibhuti, the “third eye” or the “all pervading” connected to Lord Shiva, the symbol trident, and the clouds, which represent “high above.” All of these, then, are represented as the symbolic context within the Hindu temple, where Kashi as a whole is emphasised as a temple as well. Therefore, the symbols within the perimeter arches are ultimately contained in the arches that are shaped in the form of a temple structure.
The design in Image 9 shows the symbolic pillars and the perimeter arches that were created in the first phase of the Kashi floating stage. The pillar and the arch structures were all painted white to emphasise the notion of “purity.” They were also finished with white to allow colour changes to its surface throughout the day, including during the various performances. Indeed, the different lighting moods created during the performances were also reflected on the pillars and arches.\(^{12}\)

The first phase of design also included the ramps on both sides of the floating stage. They were conceptualised as the “bridge” to “cross-over” to another realm. This was especially materialized during the performances. As the performance unfolds, the entire floating stage is turned into a magical space.

\(^{12}\) The design of the pillars, laid-out in a diamond form is also to reduce wind friction. The design on the perimeter arches as cut-outs also helped in reducing wind resistance by letting the wind pass through.
The second phase of the Kashi floating stage was conceived as the space of the “royal”, where Lord Shiva is perceived as the King of Kashi. In order to present this idea visually, additional constructed arches were suspended between the pillars as a backdrop to the floating stage (Image 10).

![Image 10 – Stage Design and lighting moods](image)

The Image 10, show how the different lighting moods were able to change the colours of the design pillars and the arches. The whole space, with the night sky as the backdrop, enhanced the aesthetic beauty of the entire space of the Kashi floating stage. In that manner, the space was also able to enhance the visual experiences of the audience. The stage space in the form of a “palace” also uplifted the performance experience when great masters, such as, Pandit Birju Maharaj, Saswasti Sen, and Rohini Bhaté’s troupe, performed the north Indian dance form of Kathak (this dance style is also popularly known to have emerged from the royal courts). The Kathak performance with the created ambience, visually electrified the space, as “royal palace.”

In the final phase (the last three days) of the Kashi floating stage design, various symbols associated with Lord Shiva were created as visual backdrops. These symbols
were created to visually magnify and enhance the audience’s perspective of experiencing the aesthetic beauty of Lord Shiva’s symbolic expressions (Image 12).

**The Dance of the Bhills**

One of the highlights of the dance performances on the Kashi floating stage was the dance of the *Bhills*. This dance is believed to have originated from the land of Madhya Pradesh in northern India. It is popularly known as the dance of the *Bhill* tribes and sometimes referred to as the dance of the hunters. The *Bhills* are considered as fine archers. In fact, the word *Bhill* is thought to have derived from its meaning as the “bow.” It is also mentioned that the *Bhills* enjoy their successful hunting by singing and dancing.

The Temple of Fine Arts group has performed the *Bhill dance* on different occasions for many years. It is considered one of the signature dance items of the institution. The institution’s pioneer dance master, the late Guru Gopal Shetty, originally choreographed the creative concept and idea.

The dance begins with the tribal devotees adoring Lord Shiva in the form of fire. Squatting in stylized position in the form of inner and outer circle, the dancers move their bodies and hands to represent the movement as fire. This is done as the music resonates: “*Om Namo Shiva Shiva Shambho...*” Their whole bodies represent the flames and the fingertips throb like the sparks of the fire. The whole form symbolically represents a shamanic ritual, where circulating the fire is perceived as the symbol of divine power (Schechner, 1993).
The dancers in adoring the divine fire, gracefully rise from the floor position and commence their movement in continuous circular form. They do this by creating inner and outer circles that move in opposite directions. As they move in circles, they clap and strike specific dance poses. The inner and outer circles create the form of a *mandala* and, so, the centre is identified as possessing the core energy.

The dancers then breakaway from the circle formation and create the brick pattern. This, in a larger context forms the shape of a huge rectangle. In this formation, they dance praising the Lord. Joyfully dancing, the male dancers move in a hunting style to offer Lord Shiva their hunted food. The female dancers on the other hand, move gracefully to represent their daily chores. Together, both male and female dancers create intersecting lines, forms and patterns. In their dance, they also express various emotions of the dance.

At a specific point in the music, the sound of the thunder is heard. The thunderous music represents the idea of Lord Shiva. During this moment, the male dancers create the formation of a pyramid, emphasizing the notion of Lord Shiva as the primordial energy. The female dancers then create the pattern “V” and bow to Lord Shiva, represented in the form of a pyramid.

Once again, the dancers burst out from their formation and dance in a vibrant mode, as the music and the lyric continue to praise Lord Shiva. The dancers create various patterns in space, interlocking and interweaving between each other. Occasionally, they also strike different poses of Lord Shiva as they dance to the music of the Bhills.

As the music reaches its crescendo, the dancers once again move to form the inner and outer circle. Moving in this position they once again, move their fingers and
limbs, throbbing as flames to represent the concept of Lord Shiva as the form of fire. Finally, the dancers return to their starting positions as the music fades away. The dance ends where it all began.

The Bhill dance, conceptualized and choreographed by the late Guru Gopal Shetty, was again featured as one of the closing events during the MahaShivarathri festival in Kashi. Having danced this dance piece in the past, I however wanted to explore this dance further. Therefore, the ideal occasion of the festival and the space of Kashi itself allowed me to experiment with the Bhill dance in a different way. Nonetheless, the initial concept and choreography of the dance was followed through. At Kashi event, the intention was to enhance the Bhill dance further, so as to enrich the performance experience.

**The Bhill Dance in Kashi**

During the Bhill dance rehearsal on the Kashi floating stage, I visualised the dance very differently from what I had known of it in the past. As I watched the rehearsal from the highest point of the Ghats, the experience of seeing the dance movement and formation was completely new. First, the starting position of the dancers in the form of inner and outer circle clearly represented the idea of a mandala. As the dancers moved, the various patterns and movements in the dance created the effect of various lines as contours in space. Each time when the dancers intersected each other, I experienced it as the interlocking of energies. It represented the movement of the universe.
This experience prompted me to visualise the dance as the concept of Lord Nataraja. In his dance, the whole universe is thought of as the rhythmic formation that creates the various motions in space (refer Chapter 2, section on Lord Nataraja). The various patterns and movements in the *Bhill* dance resembled the ideology of Lord Shiva-Nataraja.

While experiencing the rehearsal in this manner, I visualised the dancers not only as tribes or hunters, but also as *rishis* / sages. I felt that, the “dancers as seekers” were dancing to offer their obeisance to Lord Shiva. Each of their movements was conceived to mirror the movement of the universe. In that sense, the movements created were perceived to be in communion with Lord Shiva.

While watching the rehearsal, the next experience came as a sudden explosion. When the dancers formed the shape of pyramid during the thunderous sound of music, I envisaged it as the “opening of the third eye” of Lord Shiva. I felt that because the “dancers as seekers” were continuously offering their obeisance to Lord Shiva, Shiva himself appeared to them.

However, Lord Shiva as Nataraja is also conceptualised as a dual energy. In his dancing form, he is perceived as embracing the movement of male and female, the vibrant and the graceful. His concept is also visualised as having the form of *Yin* and *Yang* (refer chapter 2, section on Lord Nataraja). Therefore, as I watched the rehearsal, the seekers were doubly blessed by the presence of Lord Shiva in the form
of Shiva and Shakti. They were exalted by the appearance of Shiva and his consort Parvati.\textsuperscript{13} I consider this as receiving darshan / the gaze from the Supreme almighty.

Further, the experience of listening to the loud rumbling sound in the music stimulated my senses to envision it as representing Shiva’s dance presence everywhere. I experienced Lord Shiva not only as a physical presence on the floating stage but everywhere else as well.

At that particular moment, the continuous burning of the corpses at the nearby Ghats also caught my attention. I experienced the relationship between the ever-burning bodies to the dance of the Bhills. Both created a sense of simultaneous and continuous motion – in that every atom as movement is created and destroyed. This cycle of evolution, I experienced in the thunderous music of the Bhill. I experienced the similarities of Lord Shiva’s concept of “destruction” in the form of burning corpses and in the form of the Bhill dance.

Ultimately, I visualised Shiva’s appearance in the dance as a form that created “transformation” in the seekers. At the end, the “dancers as seekers” move in a circular motion, representing the motion of the universe and, finally, merge into the dance of Shiva and Shakti.

Hence, having watched the rehearsal from atop the Ghats, I asked myself “how can such a visualisation be presented in the dance of the Bhills? Can such concepts be crystallised? Can it affect the dancers and the audience?” In propounding these ideas, my intention was to enhance the performance experience further by negotiating the

\textsuperscript{13} Lord Shiva’s consort is known as Goddess Parvati. She is always equated as the other half embodiment of Shiva. Referred as being born to Himavat, the lord of the mountain, she is considered as the source of all the powers in the universe.
fundamental concepts of the original choreography. I therefore, set to visualize how design can be part of the Bhill dance performance.

**Integrating Design in the Dance of the Bhills**

The various experiences of being in Kashi prompted me to perceive the Bhill dance as form of ritual dance. Therefore, the idea was to commence the dance by creating similar effect to the concept of “burning / destruction.” Thus, the element of fire was considered a key element of the dance. The element fire was also perceived as the symbol of purification. As a result, in the beginning of the Bhill dance on the Kashi floating stage, I had two dancers light the stage space by setting torches alight. In that process, Shiva’s symbolic designs, which were created as backdrops for the dance, were also torched (refer to DVD). This was created to link the concept of fire in the Bhill dance to the concept of fire in the Kashi space. I believe this visually signified Lord Shiva as the embodiment of destruction and, by such actions, the whole space is purified.

Next, in order to create an immediate connection of the dance to the concepts of MahaShivaratri festival, a huge linga was created. The design was also created to include a base platform. It was designed and created as a three dimensional linga sculpture. The idea was to position Shiva and Shakti as dance characters within the linga structure.

As the dance progressed, the forms of Shiva and Shakti were gradually revealed to the seekers. This was done by projecting light from the rear of the linga. Since, the linga was also created using rice paper, the light created a silhouette of Shiva and
Shakti. This effect visually encapsulated the concept of dual energy, the Yin and Yang, within the symbolic form of Shiva-linga (refer to the DVD).

The “opening” as “rupture” of the third eye was also created in the dance. Since, I was dancing as the character Shiva, I visualised Shiva dancing everywhere. I also wanted the audience to feel the presence of Shiva everywhere. In addition, I wanted the “dancers as seekers” to experience something of the beyond, something that was not known to them. This idea was implemented by using three techniques: first, by creating the effect of Shiva and Parvati emerging from the linga, second by using explosives that burst out as beautiful firecrackers and third, by synchronising all of these motions with the Bhill dance music.

Since, I knew the exact moment in the music where there is the thunderous sound, the emergence of Shiva and Goddess Parvati from the linga was made possible. I stationed a local handyman on a boat behind the backdrop of the floating stage. While executing the various poses of Shiva and Shakti with my dancing partner, I had the handyman fire an explosive at the right moment of the music. Simultaneously, both my dance partner and I burst out of the rice-paper linga structure (refer to the DVD). While assuming the characters of Shiva and Parvati, we then danced in synchronized movement and formation with the other dancers.

In order to create the effect of the seekers coming into communion with Lord Shiva and Parvati, the ending of the Bhill dance was modified. This time the choreography included the integrated movement of Shiva and Parvati dancing together with the seekers. Subsequently, Shiva and Parvati took centre stage and the dancers once again created the inner and outer circle of movement. As they moved, Shiva and Parvati
also created the circular motion. This was to highlight the concept of Lord Shiva as constituting the movement of the whole universe. Thus, by centrally locating them as part of choreography, they became the life force of concentric motion (refer to the DVD).

From the perspective view of the audience, this visual design created the effect of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati emerging from the linga and giving darshan to all who sought their blessings. The bursting of the firecracker created the effect of a lighted canopy and engulfed the whole performance space. For me, I visualised the dispersing of light as the dance of Shiva everywhere. In such creation, the importance of this aspect of the design lay in its capacity to enrich the Bhill dance concepts and uplift the performance experiences. As Vatsyayan argues, in any creative work, rasa / aesthetic experience is invented and also experienced by the creator and, in that process, also evokes similar experiences for the participants (Vatsyayan, 1977: 39). Further, she equates this momentary “transcendental experience” to the Indian concept of moksha / liberation (ibid).

Indeed, I believe that the element of enhancements in the performance of Bhill dance, especially created for the Kashi occasion, produced the effect expressed by Vatsyayan. During such festivals, the dancers, the dance and the audiences all became part of experiencing the space and experiencing the event as well. Hence, the designs that was created and implemented for the dance of the Bhills, generated a holistic experience that was both transcendental and spiritual.
Audiences Responses

In this space, the audience that came to witness the event was very different from audiences that patronise modern theatre spaces. In Kashi, both the audiences and the practitioners inhabit the same space to share a sacred experience.

However, there were various responses from the audiences and the performers who were engaged in the festival of *MahaShivaratri* organised by Temple of Fine Arts in Kashi. For example, the audiences in this space not only experienced the performances, but also experienced the creation of the Kashi floating stage. They saw the creation unfolding in various stages and, ultimately, were able to experience its totality when various artists from all over India staged different performances. For many in the audience, the floating stage was like a magical space where the Gods came alive in dance and music. For example, during the performance of the *Bhill* dance, the audiences rose from their seats and chanted aloud Shiva’s slogan when Lord Shiva emerged from the *linga* with his consort Parvati. For them, the thunderous music, sudden explosion and the emergence of Lord Shiva and Parvati momentarily made it all real.¹⁴ They saw the floating stage as a form of “jewel” or “divine abode”, floating on the river Ganges.

In contrast, for the various artists who performed on the Kashi floating stage, the space provided an uplifting experience. For them, the space inspired their creative genius to innovate and produce impromptu performances. O. S. Arun, a popular

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¹⁴ I gathered this from personal conversations with members of the audience. In fact, after my dance partner and I finished performing the role of Shiva and Parvati in the dance of the *Bhills*, several audience members approached us to seek blessings. For both of us, it was an experience that will remain in our hearts for a long time, and for the audience it was an uplifting experience. Refer to appendix 1 for all other newspaper reports on Kashi floating stage and performance.
vocalist said, “I have performed in many places around the world, but performing on
the floating stage in Kashi was like performing on the laps of mother Ganges. It was
an overwhelming experience.” V.P. Dhananjayan, who is a great bharatnatyam
dancer, felt very emotional while performing on the floating stage. He said, “This
beautiful created floating stage mesmerised my mind. In the night, it created an effect
of a ‘floating glow’ and performing in such space is a lifetime experience.” Many
other artists also felt and expressed the same (refer appendix 1 and 2).

Their experiences were further uplifted when the temple bells rang, which created
echoes during their performances. For the artists, the Kashi floating stage, the festival
and being in the sacred space, all influenced and enhanced their performance
experience.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed how the various experiences of being in a place like Kashi
can affect and enrich performance experiences. As I have explained, Kashi is
considered the most sacred space for Hindus and for all who encounter the space.
Even though Kashi seems very ancient in its appearance, its sacredness still exists,
today. Its confluences with the river Ganges and the intersection of the Varuna and
Asi rivers have all made Kashi a powerful place for spiritual enlightenment. Such a
place attracts seekers from all over the world to congregate and pay obeisance to its
sacredness and in doing so, “cross-over” to another realm. Thus, Kashi is seen as a
submission to the Gods, where the dead and the living are part of the “offerings.”

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15 Refer to V.P. Dhananjayan recounting his experience of performing on the Kashi floating stage as
2004).
Kashi, as I experienced it, was theatre; a “performance” that goes on forever - ritual in constant movement.

Indeed, through understanding these concepts and beliefs about Kashi, undertaking and implementing a performance project in this space is never the same when done in a modern or contemporary theatre space. As I have discussed, the most important thing when confronted with such a space is to allow oneself to be in communion with the space itself. In designing such performance space for a special festival, like the MahaShivarathri, there is no confined or conceptual design as is the case in text based theatre performance. In the case of Kashi, it is the space that is the text, the music and theatre. Therefore, the design and creation of the Kashi floating stage in such a space is conceived and produced very differently from how it would be done in normal theatre venues.

Further, the chapter has discussed the various experiences encountered in the Kashi space that ultimately influenced the conceptualisation of the Kashi floating stage and performance. All the various ideas for designing the floating stage were considered to have been inspired by the experience of being in Kashi space. In addition, this experience also affected how the dance of the Bhills could be further enhanced. The chapter then went on to discuss how the various mediums and methods permitted the dance to be visually presented and experienced by the performers and the audience.

The ultimate aim of the chapter was to project how Indian dance theatre, when symbolically designed with aesthetic qualities and created in spaces like Kashi, can uplift the performance experiences. The purpose was to explore how designs created by the influences of the Kashi space enabled the performer and the audience to be
engaged with the created space. This engagement permitted the integration of design with dance. It was created to uplift the performance experience as a spiritual offering to Kashi, Lord Shiva and the spiritual guru. In that manner, the whole experience of creating the Kashi floating stage, the dance of the Bhills and the performance by the various artists, is considered a spiritual journey. Thus, design in Kashi is also considered as part of the journey, as “cross-over.” The floating stage and the performance within the space was all conceptualized, structured and created to possibly enhance the seekers’ experiences. The floating stage and the performance within the space was able to further uplift the experiencing of Kashi-Ghat space and the Mahasivarathri festival that is ordained to Lord Shiva.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Theatre is a place where performers and audience meet; where interaction happens and where communication takes place. Theatre is also about creating artistic and humanistic experiences for participants and audiences. From the time when theatre was conceived, the purpose was to always engage the audience to the performance. However, theatre also allows performers to engage with their roles or with the characters they are portraying.\(^1\) Hence, there are many techniques used to convey intended meanings. These techniques vary according to the performance theme and the way they are executed by the practitioners.

In Indian dance theatre, there are two main techniques used in accordance with the Natyasastra. The Natyasastra clearly recommends that dance performances adopt either the technique of Lokadharmi (realistic) or Natyadharmi (symbolic). In some cases, it recommends the use of both methods where necessary. As Vatsyayan states,

Bharata discusses [the] aspect of aesthetics in the Natyasastra, and to him the problem of aesthetic is actually one mainly of technique. [...] The analysis of the plot, character and types of enacting (abhinaya), different modes (vritti) of delivery, elaborate conventions (dharma) of suggestive and realistic presentation [...] can fully be appreciated only if we realize that each of these was a vehicle of a greater purpose and had function to perform beyond itself. [...] Bharata also laid down conventions of stage presentation – realistic (lokadharmi) or suggestive (natyadharmi) – most appropriate for any particular type of [performance].

(Vatsyayan, 1977: 8 -9)

Nonetheless, from this study, it is evident that the purpose of using either of these techniques in Indian dance theatre is to create or evoke an aesthetic experience. This experience has been described by many scholars as “rasa” or the creation of

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\(^1\) In Indian dance theatre, a performer assumes many roles and interacts with different characters that are portrayed within the story. The performer also engages in the imaginative and suggestive space and objects that they express in the dance.
“flavour.” To the Indian aesthete, this term is not only used in the context of Indian dance, it is also used to express Indian art forms that are capable of creating an aesthetic experience in the viewer. The main purpose of such creation is to engage the viewer’s mind to experience something beyond the object or the subject presented. In doing so, it is perceived as being in communion with the divine. It is noted that,

Indian art is not concerned with conscious striving after beauty as a thing worthy to be sought after for its own sake; its main endeavour is always directed towards the realization of an idea, reaching through the finite to the infinite, convinced always that through the constant effort to express the divine origin of all earthly beauty the human mind will take in more and more of the perfect beauty of divinity.

(in Havell, 1909: 332)

From ancient times, art in India was developed to glorify and exemplify the many facets of the Supreme divine. Monuments, temples, sculpture, paintings were all created to uplift human experiences and, at the same time, engage the mind with the divine. Through art, humans found a means of connecting to the inner meanings of existence. Therefore, for the Indian artist, each of these art forms was created as a symbolic expression that is also aesthetically appealing.

In fact, by creating art that is symbolic, Indian artists created design formulas that engaged the mind to reflect upon its diverse forms. These artistic forms were further extended to encompass various spaces. As such, this harmonised and integrated approach transported the observer to another realm. Hence, art was perceived as a means to a spiritual path.

In India, many art forms, including dance and music, were conceived as media through which humans can gain spiritual enlightenment. Through this practise, the art, the creator and the rasika / observer, all are converging to the point for seeking
the highest purpose in artistic endeavours. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation was to address the diverse approaches undertaken by Indian artists to express art for spiritual experiences. This was discussed in the chapters on form and formless, space transformation and choreography. The chapter on form and formless also discussed how and why Indian art, as a symbolic form, is created to express the “formless state.”

Studying these ideas allowed me to investigate how fundamental symbolic designs were conceptualised and executed. The study showed how various forms created were idealised to project the “totality” of a particular form. The study also showed how symbols, as tangible forms, are created as a foundation of a yantra / meditative figure that is capable of absorbing the mind into contemplation.

The most important aspect in the study of form was that it revealed how integrated forms can possibly create an enhanced experience. The examples of the lotus symbol and the various elements in the temple structure revealed how integrated forms affected the viewer’s mind. By studying the concept of form and formless, the chapter enabled me to show how various forms in Indian dance theatre can also be expressed. It also verified how various forms can be applied in Indian dance theatre to project other ways of seeing and, in that process, create experiences of combined forms. In fact, this integration is primarily the most important aspect of the incorporation of design as a form into Indian dance.

The main objective of Chapter 2 study was to explore how Indian art as form is perceived as the formless and how through the use of various design elements, Indian dance theatre can be further enhanced. The purpose was to argue how design
incorporated in Indian dance performances can affect performance experiences. Therefore, design that is integrated into Indian dance performance can create a “total panorama,” rather than just an isolated perspective.

To further the understanding of form in Indian dance theatre, the question of space transformation was raised. The chapter on Space Transformation considered how different artistic forms in space are created to first alter the space, second, equate space as a “divine abode” and third, engage or captivate the observer’s mind. Since ancient times, various spaces have been created to explore how a physically transformed space can create another experience for the participant and the observer.

Space transformation, as I have discussed, aims to explain how space transformation in Indian dance can also affect the performance experience. The chapter showed that when design is integrated into Indian dance, it is capable of changing the element of space. The study also revealed how design, as a built-in component of Indian dance theatre, can be utilised to enrich and uplift performance expression and experience. Therefore, I argue that space transformation is an integral aspect of Indian dance expression.

In order to explore the co-relationship of design as form and space in Indian dance theatre, I argued that design can be part of choreography. In my opinion, choreography is the most important component in Indian dance theatre. Since bygone times, Indian dance has rarely been perceived as something that is choreographed. It was always about the expression of ideas. These ideas were developed to include various other theatrical forms. The purpose was to create an art form that is not only
bound by traditional techniques, but also art that was able to express the intended ideas by using contemporary techniques.

Therefore, the chapter on *choreography* revealed how Indian dance theatre extends beyond the confines of dance as mere traditional choreographic achievements. The discussion showed how various artistic forms created by different artists in Indian dance were expressed as inner visions of dance. This vision is not created by body movements alone, but is also integrated with design components. The main aim of the chapter was to explain how design played a crucial part in creating the symbolic dimensions that are aesthetically appealing and are able to enrich Indian dance composition. Design within Indian dance composition, as I have argued, includes other theatrical forms or mediums that express an intended vision of Indian dance creations. As Kapila Vatsyayan says,

*The Hindu mind views the creative process as means of suggesting or recreating a vision, however fleeting, of divine truth; and regards art as a means of experiencing a state of bliss akin to the absolute state of ananda or jivanmukti (release in life).*

(Vatsyayan 1977: 3)

To demonstrate how design as symbolic form and space is used in Indian dance theatre, the dissertation also explored the various techniques that were used to experiment and create the dance expressions in the specific case studies. The aim of the case studies, that is, *Vishwa Vinayaka* and *Kashi Floating Stage*, was to conduct practice-based research and thereby crystallised the theory into practice. The various documented images (stills and videos) also allowed me and the other artists to examine and study the integrated theoretical concepts. I believe that such
documentation is crucial to further the understanding of Indian dance and its potential to synthesise with other Indian art forms.

Even-though, the application of design as symbolic form and symbolic space was intended to focus on Indian dance theatre, the research outcomes also permitted applications to other art forms; such as a television production and a theatre performance based on Chinese legend. The idea here is to emphasise on the research outcome that was successfully applied and which was able to create a similar experience that of Indian dance theatre concepts.

For example, I found that it is possible to apply design as symbolic gesture to a television production. In this project, *Search for Tomorrow*, I designed a perspective view that consisted of only two walls, rather than three walls, which is the normal design for television productions. The third wall was created as symbolic space, where voice and sound were used to create the suggestive space. I saw this as similar to the creation of suggestive spaces in Indian dance.

Symbolic designs were also used in the dance performance of *Butterfly Lovers*, a Chinese legend. For example, in the last scene, a huge figure of butterfly was created as a painting. In order to create the effect of the huge butterfly, as a divine form, I used a special paint that glowed in the dark. When two dancers as butterfly lovers, merged with the huge backdrop, only the “glow” from the huge painted butterfly was visible. This created the effect of “glow” as divine form. This was designed to symbolically enhance the meaning and uplift performance experience.

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2 In 2003, the dance production of *Butterfly Lovers* was performed in Malaysia and in Singapore under its National Arts Festivals program. For me, it was an ideal project to explore symbolic and aesthetic forms in space, regardless of the nature of the production. I see this as an intercultural confluence of design and performance, where the main purpose is constantly to create *rasa*, the “aesthetic delight.”
In the two examples, that is, the *television production* and the *Butterfly Lovers*, the results showed that when design is conceived as a symbolic form, it can be applied not only to Indian dance theatre, but also to other art forms. Therefore, the thesis recommends that further study needs to be undertaken to explore how the integration of design in the performing arts can result in new ways of seeing and new experiences in performance.

Finally, through the various chapters, the thesis was able to bring out five important points or areas that I feel can be further explored in Indian dance theatre. These are the integration of design, the aspect of equilibrium, design as movement and movement as design, the state of harmony and, finally, design as symbolic and aesthetic expression.

**Design as Movement, Movement as Design**

The thesis which focused on the integration of design concepts within dance also yielded another outcome. The integration permitted me to visualise, conceptualise and idealise how the interrelationship of dance movements and design elements generates a new way of reading and implementing this component in space.

Design, which consists of lines, forms, shapes and mass, I consider as movement in space. This idea can be extracted and introduced in dance choreography. Each dance movement is created to represent the various characteristic of design.

For example, various contours in architecture can be introduced as individual or collective lines of movement in space. The vertical, horizontal, curvature and intersecting architectural design is transferred as movement in dance. The directional
lights (artificial and natural) that transform the architectural space can also be perceived as progression of directional movement in dance choreography.

On the other hand, dance movements created from various inspirational thoughts can be transferred as design concepts. The various dance movements that creates form in space is observed as sculptural form and therefore can be identified as concepts of architecture too. In addition, the dance movement can also represent how lighting design can be conceptualised and introduced within the architectural form. The way the eye, the hand gesture and the body movements can be interpreted as light formation in space.

Hence, design as movement and movement as design can be explored as a metaphor to create dance and design in a unique way. It is not seen only as objects or forms in space, but as movements interconnecting, interweaving and interacting with one another. These ideas therefore can potentially create another level of understanding and experiencing how design and dance composites one another.

**Integration of Design to Create the “Whole”**

By studying the various aspects of Form and Space in Indian art, the thesis was able to explore how these concepts can be implemented in a symbolic way into Indian dance. The study, which explored the various media, such as sculpture, architecture, light and sound, showed that “synthesis of art” can affect viewers’ experience. Therefore, the thesis emphasised how design, as an integrated element in Indian dance, was not only able to express added meanings to performance, but also enrich and enhance the traditional art form and thereby uplift performance experiences.
When conceived in this manner, design in Indian dance creates an artistic expression that I consider as creating the “whole.” The “whole” can be conceived as an art form by itself - a total theatre. Even though various theatrical elements are used to create the intended expression or meaning of the dance, the “whole” or the “sum” is able to produce another “seeing” and another experience within the viewer.

The sum can be analysed thus:

In sum, theoretical knowledge must provide the means by which the viewer achieves a new and more satisfying understanding of the work of art based on a synthesis with the evidence observed in the work of art. Theoretical knowledge helps the viewer to stand back from his or her initial viewing experience in order to see the work of art more clearly. It provides “the bigger picture”: a panoramic view of the work of art and situates it within the context from which it originated.

(cited in Richard Lachapelle et al., 2003: 89-90)

In order to generate a harmonised “whole”, the application of design ought to be conceptualised in its symbolic and aesthetic form. In a similar note, design therefore, can be applied to Indian dance, which is also executed by symbolic gestures, interposed with aesthetic qualities. This synthesis results in the creation of a panoramic viewing experience.

By interconnecting and interrelating dance and design as a symbolic gesture, the “whole” is also experienced as a symbolic expression in a bigger picture. The idea of integrating design in Indian dance, therefore, aims to express dance expressions that are interweaved to correlate to each other. In my opinion, design is capable of accentuating Indian dance to create an enhanced visual experience. It can facilitate in bringing out the intended meaning or theme of Indian dance. The “whole” allows one to not only understand the dancer or experience the dance, but also permit the
observer to experience the synthesis of Indian arts. Therefore, design can be considered as a primary ingredient in the synthesis of Indian dance performance.

When design and dance are conceptualised and executed within the confines of Indian aesthetic techniques, the resulting “whole” can be ascribed to the essence of Indian philosophical ideas to concepts of the whole. In this process, Murkeji, A.C. says;

> The philosophical value of an idea [work of art] depends upon the contribution it makes toward the formation of a whole, much as the value of every piece of colored glass in a kaleidoscope is conditioned by its contribution to the beauty of the symmetrical figure that present themselves with the turns of the tube. […] In the world of ideas [or work of art] there is no other effective force than that of the demand of the whole.

(in Dasgupta, S. N. and Murkeji, A. C.,1952: 4)

Indeed, the idea of creating Indian dance that also encompasses design elements is carefully applied to express the significance of the “whole” in performance space. The idea is to create the appropriate combination of forms through different design mediums that ultimately produce ‘a physical form’ and create a unified experience for the viewer. Hence, the integrated forms, which include the dancer’s body, create Indian dance that goes beyond the traditional practice of depending on the physical expressions of the dancer only. This was clearly evident in chapter 3. I emphasised the importance of the whole as “total theatre” in the performance of Kathakali.

By exploring design in this manner, the dissertation aimed to push the boundaries of traditional techniques to include contemporary approaches. However, the idea of such an approach, as I have discussed in the various chapters, showed how the application of design is capable of reconstructing Indian art into Indian dance theatre. This thereby strengthens the concepts of tradition. The “whole” that is created by the
various theatrical techniques, enhances the vision of creating Indian dance theatre to a higher level.

In years to come, Indian dance composition ought to interlink with other art forms in performance space so as to keep pace with the change of time and space, while remaining rooted in its aesthetic theory. Moreover, the ultimate purpose of any Indian art form, especially Indian dance that is capable of synthesising all other forms, is to evoke an experience regardless of the techniques used. In my opinion, design as symbolic technique can be considered an important aspect of integration that pushes Indian dance theatre into the future, and creates an enhanced performance experience for the performers and audiences.

Indeed, to establish Indian dance theatre in this manner, the ideas of design ought to reflect the concepts that are embedded in the iconography of Lord Shiva - Nataraja. Every possible technique needs to mirror the symbolic concepts of this magnificence icon, so that Indian dance theatre is never isolated from its roots, even if contemporary methods are used. Therefore, design can foster Indian dance theatre to create “rasa experiences” of the future.

So far, the scholarship on Indian dance performances / theatre has only focused on the history of dance and the body as the primary medium / subject of dance expression and communication. I believe that the scholarship should also consider how other art forms, such as visual arts, can be incorporated into design techniques to enrich Indian dance theatre.

Certainly, by integrating design as symbolic expression with the body as the main dance form, it is possible to extend the horizons of Indian dance performance
experience. From out of the tension between the traditional and the contemporary techniques can sprout a new dynamism in Indian dance theatre, especially in performances that are created for modern and contemporary theatre spaces. The ultimate purpose, however, should be to create innovative theatre ideas that will enhance the beauty and spirit of Indian art regardless of the techniques used. However, the technique of design integrated in dance as symbolic (Natyadharmi), can produce added expressions to the aesthetics of Indian dance theatre.

Even though the thesis constantly focused on the subject of design as symbolic interpretation, in my view, symbolic or representational art is also created to highlight its aesthetic qualities. In that manner, it does not only engage the mind to contemplate on its form, but also holds the mind to experience its beauty. Therefore, design and dance when appropriately synthesised and executed, can potentially achieve a new level of communicative and aesthetic approach in the future of Indian dance theatre experience.
Dancers perform a ballet ‘Vishwa Vinayaka’ at the Shilpakala Vedika, near Shilparamam, in Hyderabad on Friday. The score for the ballet, organised by the tourism ministry as part of Vinayaka Chaviti celebrations, blends Sanskrit chants about Ganesh with orchestral music. The dances by performers from the Malaysia-based Temple of Fine Arts blend a fusion of Bharatnatyam and Odissi styles. Singers S P Balasubramanyam and Shanker Mahadevan recorded the songs for the ballet, music for which was given by Mumbai brothers Ajay and Atul Desai. The programme will run until August 31.

Artists perform at the Vishwa Vinayaka organised by the Temple of Fine Arts International at the Shilpa Lala Vedika on Saturday.
THE HINDU
September 24, 2004

In praise of Lord Ganesha

Soft sounds of music creep into our ears as we sit in the air-conditioned Shivanjali auditorium on a pleasant evening at Vadavalli. The stillness and subdued light become touches of sweet harmony.

The expectant crowd turn their modest gaze to the blue curtain on which is written ‘Vishwa Vinayaka.’ Yes, the audience has gathered to be swayed by the divine symphony visualised in dance with the sweet power of music in praise of Lord Ganesha organised by the Temple of Fine Arts International founded by Swami Shantanand Saraswathi.

The dance drama, “Vishwa Vinayaka,” set to music by Ajay and Atul with colourful sound effects was a brilliant evocation of Lord Ganesha’s ubiquity in the cyber age.

The primordial deity’s vibrant universality was captured with an aesthetic finesse evoking many moments of intense spiritual insight and devotion in those present.

The opening scene depicting the abysm of the unbounded Infinite and the elements splitting into space as the elephantine form of the Lord was gripping. The telling manner in which Lord Ganesha made His presence felt in different climes and cultures as the One to initiate us on the path of Enlightenment with visual effects in the following scene invested it with a spiritual halo.

The total involvement of the troupe offering their prayerful obeisance to the awesome deity in a colourful procession in the next scene was a willing suspension of disbelief to the audience. Their eulogy on the attributes of the Lord as enshrined in ‘Ganapathi Atharvashirsha’ Upanishad and ‘Ganesh Chalisa’ in the fourth and fifth scenes was a soulful presentation.

The final scene of the Visarjan ceremony when the devotees throng the ocean and riverbeds to immerse Vishwa Vinayaka to symbolise the dissolution of our limited consciousness into the vast ocean of cosmic consciousness was marked by poise and devotional fervour.

Fusion in music need not necessarily produce confusion. Whoever could not be moved by the harmonious blend of the classical and contemporary forms in capturing the Lord’s vibrant universality? Only Vishwa Vinayaka could do it.

T. K. GANAPATHY
(e-mail: tkg@vsnl.com)

A scene from the dance drama “Vishwa Vinayaka,” ... marked by poise and devotional fervour. — Pic. by K. Ananthan
Student: Mr. Saseedaran K Anandan
School: Media, Communication & Cultural Studies
Institution: Murdoch University
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy
Production: Vishwa Vinayaka

Note: Please mark with a cross [X] where appropriate.

1) The production of Vishwa Vinayaka created a strong emotional impact on me:

[] Absolutely
[] Highly impacted on
[] Can not say
[] Minimal impact
[] Did not feel impacted upon

2) The rear projection images helped in understanding the theme of Ganesh:

[] Absolutely
[] Highly impacted on
[] Can not say
[] Minimal impact
[] Did not feel impacted upon

3) The production created an enhanced spiritual experience for me:

[] Absolutely
[] Highly impacted on
[] Can not say
[] Minimal impact
[] Did not feel impacted upon

4) The blending of design and dance created a balanced and harmonized visual experience:

[] Absolutely
[] Highly impacted on
[] Can not say
[] Minimal impact
[] Did not feel impacted upon
5) The blending of traditional Indian dance with contemporary dance movements and design clearly contribute to the universality of the production theme:

[ ] Absolutely
[ ] Highly impacted on
[ ] Can not say
[ ] Minimal impact
[ ] Did not feel impacted upon

6) The narration and enactment further enhanced the performances:

[ ] Absolutely
[ ] Highly impacted on
[ ] Can not say
[ ] Minimal impact
[ ] Did not feel impacted upon

7) The following element created an impact on me:
(you may choose more than one option)

a. dance
b. choreography
c. projections
d. lighting design
e. costume design
f. audio design
g. Set Design

8) The performance was a 'total performance experience' and enriched the traditions, eventhough performed in modern theatre:

[ ] Absolutely
[ ] Highly impacted on
[ ] Can not say
[ ] Minimal impact
[ ] Did not feel impacted upon

9) Detailed Comments and feedback.
Sunday, June 12, 2005

Vishwa Vinayaka

Last weekend, I had an invitation to attend a Dance programme... Initially, I didn't have the inclination to go for it. However the decision was changed later on, by the Home Ministry. I would have regretted otherwise, for missing that show.

The Programme which was presented by the Temple of Fine Arts, was co-ordinated in a wonderful way with dancers from the age of 7 years. The beauty is that they are from different places - Australia, Malaysia, India & Singapore, and I was told that they had the training session for their part individually in their countries and finally mixed here. Amazing co-ordination!!

The programme titled 'Vishwa Vinayaka' (on Lord Ganesha) combined the traditional and contemporary dance movements to present a dynamic and moving dance fusion with stunning choreography. The songs were rendered by SPB & Shankar Mahadevan and were mesmerizing.

I could recollect the last dance programme which I watched 2 decades back in Madurai, when we got an invitation for the dancer Swarnamukhi's solo dance. Eventhough, the technology has improved nowadays so much for the stage background, audio effects, visual effects etc., the original art has not changed so much. Still, it has its own mesmerizing quality & life. By end of the day, I was happy about the splendid evening.
FEEDBACKS – VISHWA VINAYAKA

http://templeoffinearts.org/sg/VishwaVinayaka.htm

Temple of Fine Arts International presents
Vishwa Vinayaka
A tribute to Lord Ganesha through classical and contemporary music & dance
Organized by TFA Lalita Kala Company

Some audience reviews:
"Magnificent performance. The performers created a new vibrant culture for the 21st century. A true renaissance of Indian culture. – Dr. Balaji Sadavisan, Senior Minister of State.

Stupendous. One continuous "high spots". This is one of the best performances we've seen in any part of the world – Edward E Mckinnon, National University Singapore

"a divine symphony visualized in dance...The primordial deity's vibrant universality...captured with aesthetic finesse. . . " – The Hindu

Every moment was exciting and gasping. Combining classical with contemporary was second to none – Toby Lam.

We cried with joy. The best show we have seen so far – Ravi
NEWSPAPER REPORTS – KASHI FLOATING STAGE

Newspaper report, translated by Mr. Radhakrishnan, a member of the Temple of Fine Arts International

The report that follows is based mainly on the coverage activities in Kashi by the vernacular (Hindi) and English language dailies over the period 10th February to 3rd March 2003. In all instances the source of the news is cited and the text, where required, is translated from Hindi into English.

Head Lines prior to the commencement of the event:

1. Atirudra Mahayagya from February 17th (The Pioneer, 10 Feb).
2. Pandit Birju Maharaj, Usman Khan and other artistes to congregate to make cultural offerings on the banks of Kedar Ghat (Dainik Jagaran, 13 Feb).
3. Construction of stage on the laps of Mother Gange in Kedarghat. An interview with Creative Director – Australia’s Saseedaran (A photo story of Sashi and the Barge/ stage) (Amar Ujala, 18 Feb).
4. TFA sponsor cultural performances from its students, renowned national and international artistes during the Mahayagya – Saseedaran (Photo story on Sashi) (Dainik Jagaran, 18 Feb).

Daily Reports:

The Pioneer, (English daily) on Wednesday, 19th Feb 2003, reported the entire event as follows:

Atirudra Mahayagya begins: The purpose of the function is to bring both spirituality and art together for providing peace to the people

For universal peace and welfare, the two week long Atirudra Mahayagya began at the Srividya Math in Kedarghat here on Tuesday in which as many as 121 Vedic Brahmins from different parts of the country have been participating.

The entire programme is being organised by under the auspices of Shree Mahashivaratri Ved Parayan Trust.

Giving the details of this inaugural grand religious event while talking to reporters here on Tuesday, the chief of the Trust, Mr. R. Subrmaniam Vadyar and in-charge of Srividya Math, Swami Anandswaroop Brahmachari, said that cultural events would also be organised daily at a space prepared on a barge at Kedarghat in front
of the Kedareshwar Temple. “The purpose of the function is to bring both spirituality and art together for providing peace to the people” they said.

They said that the Chief of the Shivanjali Trust and the Temple of Fine Arts (Malaysia), His Holiness Swami Shantanandaji, who is also taking part, also attended both the religious and cultural programme on the first day of the Athirudra Mahayagya, which is being held in the Srividya Math in the morning, followed by the Havana and ahuti programme and the yagyashalai made for the purpose at Kedarghat.

19 February: O.S. Arun & Party – Carnatic Classical Music

**Artistes:**

O.S. Arun – Vocal  
Nagai Sri Ram – Violin  
G.S. Krishnan- Mridangam  
Sri Ganapathy – Tabla  
Vickneswaran Ramakrishnan – Tabla

**Programme:**

O.S. Arun began with the rendering of a Varnam in Ragam Gambhira, adi tala, This was followed by a rendering of “Gangadhiswaram Shankaram, Sangam Angam Ardhanareeswaram”. He also presented several devotional compositions in praise of Siva in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit.

**Press Comments:**

At a press conference after his recital, Sri O.S. Arun said: “To be able to reach God through music sitting on the laps of Mother Ganga is a once in a lifetime opportunity. It is also a treat for me to share my music with connoisseurs of music in this great city of culture in front of Swami Shantanandji Maharaj.” O.S. Arun captivated the hearts and minds of all those present at Kedarghat with his passionate renderings possessing the voice of a tenor. The audience were spell bound with his group’s performance.” *(Amar Ujala, 20 Feb.)*

**Dhurpad Singing by Dagar Brothers**

**Artistes:**

Ustad Saiduddin Dagar – Vocal  
Dr. Anisuddin Dagar – Tanbura  
Nafizuddin Dagar – Tanbura  
Uddhav Shinde – Pakhwaj
Programme:

Ustad Dagar began with a Beyan Alap (in Rag Chandra Kauns). This was followed by a piece in Chowtha titled “Niranjan Niraakaar Parabrahma Parameshwar”

Press Comments:

The Dagar family weaved a web of joy and love through their deeply mystical form of Dhrupad music. The majesty and piety of this style of music late in the evening captured the Souls of music lovers present. Many were seen wiping tears of joy from their eyes at the conclusion of the performance. *(Aaj, 21 Feb.)*

**Ardhanareeshwar – Odissi**

**Artistes:**

Umesh Shetty  
Sukhi Shetty Krishnan  
*(Danced to CD music)*

**Programme:**

Worship of Shiva and Shakti through the medium of Odissi dance style.

**Press Comments:**

Steps of Kedarghat – Music lovers delight *(Headline, Bharat Doot 24 Feb)*.  
Professional Presentation of Sitar and Odissi *(Headline, Kashivartha, 24 Feb)*.  
The lovers of Fine Arts were stunned by the Odissi performance by artistes from T.F.A. (Malaysia) *(Dainik Jagaran, 22 Feb)*.  
The statuesque presentation of Ardhanareeshwara by the brother & sister combination of Umesh Shetty and Sukhi Shetty Krishnan kept the audience enraptured in their seats on the steps of Kedarghat. Foreigners, in particular, were seen to be totally immersed in the performance. As the dance performance reached its finale the bells from Kedareshwar Temple tolled again! *(Amar Ujala, 22 Feb)*.

**24 February: Pandit Birju Maharaj & Party- Kathak**

**Artistes:**

Saswati Sen & Dipak Maharaj – Dancers  
Pt. Mannulal Mishra- Harmonium  
Pt. Kanhaiyalal Mishra- Sarangi  
Pt. Rajesh Mishra –Tabla  
Pt. Birju Maharaj – Vocal/Tabla
Programme:

Aradhana by his Disciples
Madhurashtakam – S. Sen
Ardhanarishwar Sthuthi – D. Maharaj
Some Tihai pieces – S. Sen
Some more Tihai pieces – D. Maharaj
Demonstration of 23 Chakras – S. Sen
Radha’s Deception – S. Sen (specifically requested by Swamiji)
Guru and Shishyas – Pt. Birju Maharaj on stage with S.Sen and D. Maharaj

Press Comments:

People ecstatic with the presence of Pt. Birju Maharaj on stage (Headline, Dainik Jagaran, 25 Feb).

…And Pandit Birju Maharaj rose to perform without his dancing bells (Ghunghru). Audience enthralled by the performance with his disciples (Head line, Amar Ujala, 25 Feb).

Pt. Birju Maharaj could not control himself. He sang, he played the Tabla …. and then … he rose to his feet to dance (without the dancing bells) with his disciples… his own son Dipak Maharaj and Saswati Sen. As he danced, the music lovers ( and they were in the thousands filling Kedar and other nearby ghats) stood in unison and clapped to the cries of “Hara Hara Mahadev”. The entire scene was celestial…. Imagine Indra Sabha (the Court of Lord Indra) with Indra himself dancing along with the Gandharvas! (Hindustan, 25 Feb).

T.F.A. Dancers – Kathak & Odissi

Artistes:

T.F.A. (Malaysia): Odissi – Vidya, Vandana, Chinnu, and Dhanya

Programme:

The Kathak dance was based on the piece (made famous by Rajan and Sajan Mishra): “Jaya Shiva Shankar Jaya Gangadhar”

The Odissi dance depicted Ashta Shambhu – a eulogy that describes Lord Shiva in his eight- fold glorious forms. This is one an original work of Late Deba Prasad Das, one of the trinity of the Odissi school of dance set to the music of ‘Jaya Paramesha Haram, Jaya Paramesha Haram’.

Press Comments:

The talented senior dancers of the Temple of Fine Arts International enthralled the audience with their performances of Odissi and Kathak forms of dancing. Their facial expressions, synchronised body movements set to pre-recorded music, were
simply professional and outstanding. Lord Shiva would have been truly pleased with their offerings. *Swatantra Bharathi, 27 Feb.*

**28 February: T.F.A. – and Bhil Dance**

**Artistes:**

Saseedaran and Siddha (as Shiva and Parvati) and dancers

**Programme:**

Bhil Dance from the State of Madhya Pradesh

The Bhil dance from Madhya Pradesh was extremely scintillating. The talents of the very young and budding dancers to their senior dancers belonging to the Temple of Fine Arts were on display and kept the patrons at Kedarghat totally absorbed. As a rocket tore through an image in cloth depicting the Shivalingam, Shiva and Parvati emerged majestically to perform their cosmic dance …… the entire atmosphere was electrifying and the patrons rose in unison and applauded to the chants of ‘Hara Hara Shiva Sambha Shiva Shambo’ as the bells of Kedareshwar’s Temple tolled yet again! The future of the Temple of Fine Arts and that of these artistes is bright indeed. *(Amar Ujala, 1 March)*
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