

## Imag(in)ing the nation or otherwise: Uday Shankar's '*Kalpana*' and after..

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For a long while, the elite in India did not acknowledge the presence of dance as a part of their culture and existence—then came a stage when dance became *the* emblem of a rich and glorious history and tradition—an image that has stayed. Folk and tribal dances were part of the culture of the unrepresented few, good for showcasing the variety and the 'ethnic-ness' of the Indian people, so they were required to be put in a special category where they were clearly part of the non-elite mass, good for exhibition-like circumstances of the republic day parade, or India Festivals abroad but never deemed good enough to be representative of 'high' Indian culture. The 'pure' form of dance came into existence almost through an elaborate engineering process, whence the grammar was systematically structured, the link to Natya Shastra both deliberately and systematically sought and established, and in most cases, even the name of the form invented. In this deliberate process of shaping dance history and geography, there was no place for people who did not want to be categorized into either of the two above mentioned categories: classical and folk.

In the post-Independence era, the dance history of India was narrated with a deliberate political agenda: that of establishing the hegemony of the dominant voice of the nation builders within the nation and for building an image of India in the context of the world as a significant south Asian regional entity with a formidable cultural heritage.

More recently, this narrative has been reinforced by the works of government institutions, and their funding agencies and archival sources—privileging only those dance forms, which can be linked, to the 'sanskritized' history. The result is the creation of a Museum-like image of a high cultural practice - unchangeable, rare and exclusive.

In the process of stream-lining the heritage of dance in India, the whole question of modernity was subverted time and again. In the re-visiting of dance history, an important task therefore is to first record the multi layered and multi phased attempts at modernity by the parallel individual or community/ group agencies – as in all other forms of performance – and thereafter set off a discourse on a new historiography of colonial and post colonial encounters in dance in India. In this

Nationalism remains an important context even in the age of globalization and market economy in India, as the cultural policies continue to be framed and implemented on the basis of histories and processes formulated in the immediate post - independence era of planning an ideal image of the nation , which was shedding its colonial shackles after a long period of existing as a colonized and oppressed country.

In the context of Indian culture, and especially its dance, it is important to begin an analytical discussion with a discourse on how Indian nationalism has been framed, as Indian dance (even contemporary Indian dance), can only be read within the framework of nationalism in contemporary India.

Ernst Renan (1994: 17- 21) defines a nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”

Within the definition itself there is an acknowledgement of the fact that even if there is an existing group of people in a given territory with a common culture, psychological make-up, history, common language and economic life, the nation is not a given or an automatic entity, but has to be constructed – and acknowledged. Thus the identity of the nation is something constituted completely through human agency. Renan goes on to say, “It goes without saying that a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and its end.” (1994: 20). Hence the idea of nationalism begins from the belief that every nation has a past and must see itself as a territory with a population envisioning a future.

Partha Chatterjee (1993:pp 110-115) writes:

The idea that ‘Indian nationalism’ is synonymous with ‘Hindu nationalism’ is not the vestige of some pre-modern religious conception. It is an entirely modern, rationalist, and historical idea. Like other modern ideologies, it also allows for a central role of the state in the modernization of the society and strongly defends the state’s unity and sovereignty. Its appeal is not religious but political. In this sense, the framework of its reasoning is entirely secular....

In fact, the notion of ‘Hindu-ness’ on this historical conception cannot be, and does not need to be, defined by any religious criteria at all/ There are no specific beliefs or practices that characterize this ‘Hindu’, and the many doctrinal sectarian differences among Hindus are irrelevant to its concept. Indeed, even such anti-Vedic and anti-Brahminical religions as Buddhism and Jainism count here as Hindu. Similarly, people outside the Brahminical and outside caste society are also claimed as Hindu jati.

Talking about the exclusion of the religions like Islam or Christianity, Chatterjee (1993: 110) says,

Buddhism or Jainism are Hindu because they originate in India, out of debates and critiques that are internal to Hinduism. Islam or Christianity come from outside and are therefore foreign. And ‘India’ here is the generic entity with fixed territorial definitions, that acts as the permanent arena for the history of the jati.<sup>2</sup>

In case of India, the identity, thus curved out of the existing history, and played out through its state-directed/patronized cultural practices, was the complex narrative of an image - the ideal or the constructed – and hence justified the much discussed, and often critiqued restructuring process leading to the creation of eight classical dance forms.<sup>1</sup>

Homi Bhaba (1990: pp 1-7) discusses the narratives of the nations in the introduction of his book *The Nation and Narration*:

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only realize their horizons in their mind’s eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration- might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical

In this paper, I take up the Case Study of *Kalpana*, a 122 minute film that Uday Shankar wrote, directed, and starred in, completed in the year 1948 – I look at *Kalpana* as a film which of course was made with a concrete aim to document Uday’s creative endeavours in dance, but also was a structured, if not cohesive, narrative putting together several important, conflicting and often contested issues of anti-colonial, nationalistic and progressive agenda of that time. The Film *Kalpana* remains one of the first and only documents of parallel modernistic endeavour.

In most of the criticisms aimed at his dance, his understanding of Indian culture and more concretely at his film *Kalpana*, Shankar's understanding and efforts have been taken as an individual reaction and reading of Indian culture and society. I would like to suggest through this article, a new reading of his film and with the help of that as a concrete document, an understanding of his art. Hence I propose that we place *Kalpana* in those group of films of the post World War II era of internationalism, whereby the nations were not trying to wipe off their differences and create a 'Global' world of cultural universals, but were trying to establish a phase of international exchange of ideas and concepts, to strengthen the process of establishing national identities.

Shankar, after his choreographing and performing experience with Anna Pavlova, began creating his own dance by presenting the 'orient' to the west. Soon he was making a journey of self discovery, and experiencing movements essentially belonging to an Indian tradition. His philosophy of choreography never remained contained by borders between the east and the west, and constantly moved across to incorporate other ideas and images. His film *Kalpana* (meaning literally 'Imagination'), showcased many of his ideas, his views on life, and a lot of his choreography, and remains a document of his creative ability to transcend borders. Even though his dance still continues to be described as hybrid – Shankar's dance vocabulary of movements were born out of his encounter with India at many levels – from rural to urban, from male to female, from different ethnic groups, from moneyed business-men to students from lower middle class families.

The issues of local versus global, regional diversity, statehood, modern policies and trends of education, artistic freedom, political as well as activist intervention, were dealt with not from within the structure of nationalistic discourse in this movie, but from outside, as Uday remained a protagonist, who never was seen as "one of their own" by the nationalists in their process of building the modern India.

Uday Shankar's western encounter started almost 30 years before his making of *Kalpana*. In fact, to quote his wife Amala Shankar, "Uday felt he was already too old to perform while doing *Kalpana* - and he wanted the dances to be danced by a group rather than be the focus himself."<sup>2</sup> This was in direct contrast to the fact that he had no other male dancer in his troupe till 1935, when he brought Madhavan from the southern part of India, who was trained in Kathakali, and mostly did the roles of 'the tribal or warrior'. During the first several years of forming his troupe and even later he himself did all the roles of the divine, the god, the principle male dancer himself. His dance experience with Pavlova, and his immense popularity with women, gave him the confidence to posit himself as the representative of that very orient, which in the colonizer's imagination remained largely a feminine one, in many ways justifying the eclipsing of the feminine orient by the patriarchal, strong white colonial power, as a natural rule of patriarchy.

The notion of the 'orient' created a homogenized identity for the countries with distinct communities and culture – most of the times grouping together a completely heterogeneous group of people under the category of people, who were, spiritual, mysterious, exotic, erotic, and ultimately feminine in their servility which made them all the more enticing. Mysticism and mystery ruled the choices made of representation – in the performances of Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allen and Anna Pavlova, and so many others. At that moment in history, the entry of a male dancer – albeit, a handsome and attractive one, was sensational. As Amala Shankar often recalls, "After a performance, and after innumerable curtain calls, when the clapping was going on and on, Uday stepped forward to acknowledge the appreciation, to fold his hands and say 'thank you'. One woman sitting in the front row exclaimed in awe, 'He talks!'...."<sup>3</sup>.

Uday Shankar toured the west extensively from 1928 till late 1950s, and became known as the cultural ambassador of India, much to the irritation and anger of the classicists within India.

Joan Erdman (1997) writes:

Suddenly there was an exotic oriental dark (but not too dark) dancer, who appealed to women. In the 1930s, while touring Uday Shankar and his company in the United States, Russian impresario Sol Hurok noted that Shankar's audiences were filled with women, who adored him. And, in turn, Uday adored women, who offered themselves to him frequently and openly. Shankar's major patrons were women, not surprisingly.....

In the realm of European and American images of the exotic oriental, Shankar's appearance on the Paris dance scene in the 1930s, and his huge success in France and Germany, as well as America, paralleled a fascination with Eastern spirituality and philosophy. The Theosophical Society was gaining followers in India and abroad. During the time that Uday Shankar's father, Shyam Shankar Chaudhury, was a Sanskrit scholar in Benares at the turn of the century, he became a follower of Theosophical Society leader Annie Besant. Uday's main partner in his first company was Simkie, whose mother was a member of the Paris branch of the Theosophical Society. In addition, a number of European women, of various descent and experience though none of them Indian, had promoted themselves to the Paris public as Indian dancers. Probably the most famous—and later notorious—was Mata Hari, who presented herself as a devotee of Shiva at the Musee Guimet in 1905. So when Uday Shankar appeared as an authentic Indian, but an accessible one, able to enter the demi-monde and other Paris society as a Brahmin, son of an Indian princely state's Foreign Minister, and a former partner of prima ballerina Anna Pavlova, this was an entirely different presence, with legitimizing credentials in place. The fact that he found high class patronage, sponsorship, and venues for his programs were a function of both his genius and talent, as well as his connections.

From 1930 till 1942 Uday and his troupe gave 889 performances all over Europe. During this period he also visited America several times with his troupe.

In 1937 he performed in Kolkata, and his performance was a huge success. Given the anti-colonial, progressive movements of the time, the mix of dance choreographies, made up of everyday issues of human life and grand mythical themes, was received with great fanfare. Rabindranath Tagore himself welcomed him and later in 1939, also encouraged Uday to establish an institute called Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre at Almora, in the foothills of the Himalayas. With an impressive list of patrons like Nehru, Gandhi, Tagore, Elmhurst backing Uday Shankar, he established the academy for excellence in performance arts. He invited the best of the master teachers to work at the Centre like Amobi Singh for Manipuri, Shankaran Nambudri for Kathakali, Kandappa Pillai for Bharata Natyam, and Ustad Alauddin Khan for music. Shankar's brothers, including Ravi Shankar were all there at the Almora Centre which soon became not only the meeting place for various forms of Indian dance and music, but also the base of the performing troupe of Shankar, which toured and performed extensively in India and abroad. After four years of operation, the Centre had to be closed down due to lack of funds.

Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre trained and produced many great dancers. Zohra Segal was one of the instructors of the centre – and she also framed the curriculum of the teaching programme there. Some of the people who were at the Centre as troupe members, students etc are Zohra Segal and her sister Uzra, Guru Dutt, Simkie, Shanti Bardhan, Amala Nandi (who later Shankar's wife), Narendra Sharma, Ravi Shankar, Rajendra Shankar, Sachin Shankar, Prabhat Ganguly, Mohan Sehgal, Devlal Samar, Sundari Sridharani, Bhagabhan Das and many more.

Zohra Segal, a part of the teaching faculty and the performing troupe in Almora with Uday Shankar, in an interview with Kapila Vatsyayan, documented by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts<sup>4</sup>, speaks of the teaching methods used in Almora, and the disintegration and closure of the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre because of World War II, and drying up of the funds coming from foreign patrons. Zohra also talks about the growing interest in the medium of films, in Shankar, which led him to plan his only film, relocating and situating himself in Madras. Zohra's observation and admiration is important in the context of the whole preparation and training process of an entirely new group of performers by Shankar

after his previous group of students, and the performing troupe was completely dismantled in 1944 as they give us an insight into the making of the film.

The huge personal popularity, and the image the performing troupe of the Centre, made up of Uday as the principal male dancer (with a group of female and a few male dancers) is the background to the decision of making *Kalpana* the movie. The idea of making a movie had been there in Uday's mind for some years. His painful experience of failing to secure funds for the Almora Centre and his frustration at the refusal of the patrons to continue to believe in his venture of creating an institution, made him write a story of Udayan, an artiste, a dreamer, weaving in his dance creations, in a story which reflected, often simplistically, the images of the colonized, shackled country and the dream and aspiration of the soon to be independent nation along with his own idea of art, creativity, freedom, and ideal patronage. The ideal, in most of the film, remains melodramatically projected through idealistic stories, woven mostly with Shankar playing the hero/ protagonist in the story, and the god, the lover, the handsome dancer in the dream / dance sequences.

Joan Erdman (1997) writes:

Nationalism and colonialism are not mere external contexts for Shankar's dance and success; they are the context in the midst of which he performed, was reviewed, met his patrons, and created his repertoire.

Finally, there is the repertoire itself—a sine qua non—and audience and critical response to Shankar's productions. In evaluating and analyzing Shankar's opus, the same complexities of time are involved. What was modern in the 1930s is historical today. Was his legacy to be in touch with his times? In that case his son Ananda and wife Tanushree Shankar are carrying on his father's new tradition in their Calcutta company. Or was his choreography so far ahead of its time as to be only understood now? Recently, viewing Uday Shankar's *Kalpana* in Madras (now called Chennai), I sat amongst a dance audience from the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, which presents an annual dance conference every December. An Italian practitioner of Bharatanatyam and scholar of Indian culture exclaimed while watching Shankar's dances, "This is new, it's post-modern, it's Indian! Everyone needs to see this now".<sup>5</sup>

After more than 60 years of having remained in the grey zone of oblivion, *Kalpana* is in the news again. The great cinema director Martin Scorsese is eager to restore it<sup>6</sup>. The media is taking a huge amount of interest as a result of the involvement of Scorsese's name in the issue. For me, as an anthropologist, and having grown up as a miniscule part of the Shankar's dance legacy, this interest spells the beginning of a resurgence of interest in Shankar's work in terms of its holistic contribution, his seemingly apolitical and often criticised understanding of the medium of art, and most importantly his idea of nation and citizenship.

Having been constantly pained and surprised throughout the 80s and 90s about the almost-complete negation of Shankar's contribution through his dance and dance-related works, it is at this point that I realise the importance of viewing Shankar's work academically in the context of the dual discourses of colonial and post colonial development in performance, and trajectories of development of dance in India.

*Kalpana* has been ignored to a large extent as was its maker, as he was more or less put in a box by reformists and nationalists, as none of them were comfortable in categorizing him and his work into slots made for all 'Indian' dance categories i.e. folk and classical. As a feature film and a chronicle/document of Uday's work the film made at a critical juncture of the period of five years from 1944- 1948- released in 1948, speaks of many facts never properly analysed for its structure, narrative, politics, or the lack of it, or any other issue, as there has been no academic work on this.

In order to start the discussion on the movie in general, I would like to discuss the time frame of the making of *Kalpana*.

The film *Kalpana* is one of Shankar's most celebrated /critiqued achievements and an important part of his creative legacy. Released in 1948, *Kalpana* is made at a time which marks the point of transition from the era of the 'Raj' to the formation of the new nation-state - India. Made through the period of handover of power by the colonial power to the new Indian nationalist polity, the film stands as an important narrative amongst others, recording ideals, aspirations, imaginations for the new nation – at one level, of course, embodying and reflecting the artist's subjective imagination, but at another level, reflecting the grand narrative of the predominant Hindu cultural statements made through the imaging of the new nation by its political planners. *Kalpana* forms a cultural bridge between two epochs with its narrative and dance sequences as a imagination (which is the meaning of the word "kalpana"). The film is a testament to Shankar's dual artistic legacy and often critiqued sensibility, reflecting his interpretation of his cultural heritage combined with an acquired sense of stage presentation due to his western exposure.

Erdman writes:

Shankar went to Madras to make his only film, *Kalpana*, which he showed in India and abroad in 1948-49. Praised for its dance filming, critics and audiences found *Kalpana*'s story troubling. It was a pre-independence narrative, and contained reminders of what was alleged to tarnish Uday's reputation. In brilliantly creative dance scenes and less scintillating dramatic ones, *Kalpana* satirized Indians who tried to retain lost power after independence and showed women in competition for his favors. (1997)

Often criticized for his borrowed western eye and aesthetics, Shankar, from the beginning of his choreographic journey, had two distinct elements in his choreography and choice of narrative. On the one hand, his projection of his imagined India, coming alive through popular Hindu myths and portrayal of gods and goddesses, with costumes and jewelry carefully crafted and often chosen from different adjacent cultures of Bali, Java etc, created an extended 'Indian'-ness, extended beyond the everyday 'real' to the glorified, exoticised, aspired for, Indian life. This element is abundant in *Kalpana*, as Shankar chose to weave in these most popular of the dances into the main narrative of the film. Inevitably he danced as Shiva or Kartikeya in all these dances.<sup>7</sup> (Show Kartikeya, Shiva). In the reclaimed and restructured classical dances like Bharata Natyam also gods and goddesses were main elements. But in Uday's productions, the themes around the gods assumed a grand dimension, with the use of group choreography.

### **Structuring the image**

Shankar worked through his film text, by choosing certain issues, and developing his dance sequences (or mostly fitting his existing choreography) within them. The narrative worked on two levels in order to create the images of the 'existing' and the 'imagined' / 'ideal' nation. At the level of existing reality, the great tragedy of the Bengal famine, the transition from a feudal / agrarian to an industrial society with a different faces of oppression of the ruling class, the emergence of an elite, moneyed class- which had the power as well the voice of authority carried the main thread of continuity of the storyline. This 'real' was juxtaposed with a constant and at times undistinguishable transference to the dream where the imagined 'ideal', mythical, magical or the supernatural was woven in. This was where Shankar incorporated all his popular dance creations around mythical themes, not always caring about sequencing them in a relevant manner with the storyline. Here he also wove in his own idea of the imagined independent nation – addressing issues of land man relationship, education and women's emancipation, different phases of male-female relationships, the ideal structure of an institution for teaching art, patronage , and so many other things.

I would like to focus on specific scenes to analyse the ideas and images that were central to the making of this film.

### **The turmoil of transformation from an agrarian to an industrial mode of life**

A sizable portion of the film is devoted to the question of industrialization and the right balance between Agriculture and the new industrial growth. Starting with an individual entrepreneur showing and talking about a model of a factory that he imagines will change the life of the people completely this scene takes us to a complete mechanization of human efforts and energy, and finally a revolt by the workers against the exploitation by the owners of the means of production. The narrative is simple, but direct, where the workers lament the complete misuse of land, and the neglect of agriculture as a means of livelihood. It also stresses the importance of a balance approach to agriculture and industry.

The extensive sets used in the scene where Shankar takes up the issues of urbanization, industrialization, the exploitation of the work force, human life as machine, the rural urban balance – is a reworked section from his choreographic work ‘Labour and Machine’. Using simple wooden boxes of different dimensions, and projections of parts from the typewriter, he planned and created sets of the semi-dark interior of a factory, using mechanical movements to depict the mechanization of life. More noteworthy than the sets or the depiction of the thematic, is the range of movements – created for the representation of the total scenario of machines and the workers – not drawn from any particular existing movement vocabulary but actually created for the specific purpose of enacting the scene. Extensive use of choreographic designs at different levels, and complex synchronizations of multiple rhythms as well as movements establish the activities of a factory, and changed life of the people who are still in a dilemma over the choice of industrial work over agriculture.

In this particular scene a striking balance is achieved between movements from daily lives of ordinary people and postures and technique from different existing movement vocabularies of Indian Dance – thus enhancing the creative moments and also providing a huge range of non-grammatical movement patterns which till then were never thought to be possible ingredients for creating a dance. Movements from daily lives, eating, shaving, walking, sitting, running have been utilized in two particular ways: firstly to build a stylized movement vocabulary out of everyday movement practices, and secondly to incorporate the everyday movements into the story as tools to help the depiction.

### **The women in *Kalpana*: the image of/for the nation?**

A large part of the critique of Uday Shankar’s movie at that time came from within India. His storyline was criticized on the ground that it portrayed Udayan, the principle protagonist, played by Shankar, being surrounded by women. Some harsher views also mentioned Shankar’s attraction to women and their overawed reaction to his presence on stage. The source of discomfort could also be about the way the female roles were framed. Women’s roles in *Kalpana* are crafted out largely on the basis of Shankar’s stage productions – portraying the ambiguity of the women’s position in the minds of the nation – planners. On the one hand she remains the ‘perfect’ woman, the mother, the ‘ideal’ emotional, possessive, yet submissive lover. On the other hand in several scenes she emerges as an educated equal partner of her male counterpart challenging age old shackles put around females in the name of tradition, and also defying the discomfort about the female body in ‘public’ spaces.

Throughout *Kalpana*, women appear in specific roles as well as in group performances, as a part of the main narrative and also in the group choreographies. As mentioned before, the principle female roles are woven around the character of Udayan, as two female characters vying for his attention. This part of the

story drew a lot of criticism as the characters and the story appear weak and in sharp contrast to the independent, self sufficient, women who become important part of the dream sequence.

On a discursive level, the nation's ambiguity about its women is reflected in *Kalpana*, in the way the whole question of gender has been handled. In the context of nationhood, women in India have been largely visualized and projected as the careers/reproducers of culture and ideologies. Women in the context of the popular nationalist discourse, are seen principally as mothers, and therefore their role as the socializers of children has been highlighted time and again. Hence, all responsibility of a nation's upliftment is indirectly or directly the women's responsibility. The Nationalist discourse has always fixed the 'ideal' role for its women citizens, thereby creating separate standards of social/cultural behavioural practices for the male and the female subjects.

On yet another level, women are portrayed as the symbolic embodiment of the nation as a gendered entity, the eternal mother, who absorbs all the hurt, disgrace, and calamity directed towards her children, who is pained when the children quarrel amongst themselves, and create disharmony. This much used image becomes a common denominator of women in later Bollywood movies of the 50s and 60s as well and continues to be the framework within which the ideal notion of women's role/citizenship operates in the country.

### **Dreams of development vs. existent social structure**

Shankar also included a scene which had less of dance and more of dialogue questioning the means and the ends of the existing education system where a group of male and female students wearing graduation gowns, come out in two gender specific lines. The scene hints on the implied equalizing effect of modern education where the telltale signs of class, caste, gender and religion etc get overshadowed by the effect of the formal degree. Shankar's hope of a caste/class/gender less society becomes clear here where he puts emphasis on modern education as being the path to development. At the same time his apprehension about the misuse of an education system, which could create more inequality, if the goals are not clearly defined is also conveyed. The students are shown to be walking out as their fathers are waiting. The fathers start expressing their delights at their sons' rise in the social status as graduates, and their increased market value, by saying things like, "Great, my son, you are so qualified that I can ask for fifty thousand rupees for your dowry now!" The continued scene portrays the young generation's confusion and response at their fathers' reactions and at the ends of education, by all of the graduates pointing to a huge question mark on the screen behind and saying to the fathers in unison, "We respect you, but this is our future". This is followed by a crowd of female graduates, all of them with their degrees rolled up in their hands, expressing their concern about the means of education. The use of vernacular languages instead of Hindi, marks the dialogues where they shout in visible act of protest, "we do not want such education", "It is impossible to build a nation without a national education policy". The scene culminates in all the students throwing their degrees up in the air, in a clearly portrayed act of protest. The next, continued sequence is of the same group of women, dressed in urban, everyday clothes (with a deliberate projection and assertion of independence in the choice of clothes, the walk, with the head held high, without any cover on their head, and a very obvious self-assured body language), walking down what looks like the fashion show ramp of today. They face a group of older men, whose traditional garb hints at their social position as conservative, who try laying down the rights and wrong to the women. This sequence, known to the dancers as "old and Young", was performed by us as members of the performing troupe of Uday Shankar India Culture Centre, as a part of the recreated choreography "Labour and Machinery" by Amala Shankar in the late 1970s. It had powerful moments of questioning of age-old norms, which still continue to plague women in the name of tradition. It is a liberating moment where women challenge, question and ridicule the old men by using dance and facial expressions and also breaking into loud laughter, each



time the men try to assert the “dos and don’t do’s. While stemming from the questions regarding education and social status, this scene adds to the dialectic development of the image of the woman in general in the film, referring again to the ambiguity about the woman’s position as felt even in contemporary India.

Exaggerated and stylized movements of the body which are much beyond the natural movements of protest, are used along with the everyday natural movements, just as in the rest of film, interspersed with structured dance moments. All three of the above mentioned elements are carefully choreographed to make a special sense of the dialogue, not only in the language of films but also in the choreographic language specific to dance.

### **The much celebrated theme of “Unity in Diversity”**

The film has constant reference to the much hyped theme “Unity and diversity”, which became the principal nationalistic projection of the Indian state with its hugely diverse population. The celebration of castes, class, ethnic and religious diversities takes up a sizable amount of the 122 minute film, where the diversity is celebrated through a proud montage of dances by different ethnic and religious groups in their traditional dresses and ornaments, and using their own musical equipments and songs. The reference to diversity comes up time and again at different moments, which remained a favourite theme of Shankar’s dance repertoire before and after *Kalpana*. In fact his popular repertoire based on dances of India, became a popular trend followed in Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) performances, and countless other performances of later years.

### **Reality vs. dreams: problem of metaphors**

Another particularly important issue that is taken up and woven into the story is the relationship of the state to the private kingdoms of the local princely states. The inclusion / involvement/ legislative power concerning these princely states were an important matter debated throughout the last phase of the colonial period. A satirical take on the freedom of these princely territories, addressed, both at a realistic and an absurd level, the autonomy of these states and their heads. This particular issue – woven into the dreams and aspirations of the protagonist of *Kalpana*, given the time frame of making the movie, is particularly political in its choice, as it is not a part of any existing dance choreography of Shankar’s. His concern about the on-going negotiations for integration and the British policies for these states were reflected in the film.

Partha Chatterjee in his introduction to his edited book *State and Politics in India* (1997: 1 -2), writes:

There were some 565 princely states over which the British exercised paramountcy without actually incorporating those territories into the provinces of British India. According to the terms of the transfer of power, the lapse of British paramountcy meant that the rulers of the state regained full sovereignty, although they were given the option of joining either India or Pakistan. There was furious diplomatic activity on the part of the new political authorities of India and Pakistan in the days immediately preceding independence to get prices to sign the instruments of accession to their respective dominions. Vallabhbhai Patel, the deputy Prime Minister of India, took initiative in this regard to put together a single territorial entity over which the newly independent Indian state would exercise sovereignty. The states were first asked to concede to the Indian Union only the powers of defence, external affairs, and communications, and were invited to continue participating in the upper house of the Dominion legislature where a new constitution was being made. In the end , most of the princes of states surrounded by or contiguous to the territory of India – 554 states to be exact – agreed to join.

Let us take for instance a scene about the dream institution of Udayan, a huge number of people have arrived for a public performance. The princes of private princely states start arriving on their palanquins and special carriers. Many people, both Indian and foreigners, in western clothes arrive alongside scantily clothed peasants, villagers and workers. The gates to the auditorium are low. People have to crawl in. When asked the reason for this, one of the volunteers explain the necessity to bow down to art and artistic endeavours- regardless of their social or economic positions. The satire and comic is made evident in the way the heads of the princely states are dressed, or are exercising their power – or through their reaction and implied position about being subjected to common Indian legislative regulations. Shankar's personal opinion about the special powers of the princely states, and the national debate around this issues are incorporated in the imagination through the dream of Udayan. During the same performance, the Indians wearing western clothes are barred from entering, and are asked to come back wearing national costumes, while the westerners wearing the same kind of clothes are allowed in. the role of an ideal citizen is etched out alongside the expectations from the soon-to-be-independent nation.

Shankar's concern and questioning of the power structure and statehood, along with many other immensely relevant issues in the context of the time the movie was made, of course makes the film a document and record of protest, resistance, and debate. But more importantly it also highlights the penetrating farsightedness of the story-teller/choreographer/director, which made him focus on issues that emerged as debates of tremendous importance in the following years, which continue to trouble the country and its policy-makers.

There are constant dialogues, narratives and songs which raise questions like 'who does this nation belong to?', 'what is the way in which all people, male/female, old/young, poor/rich in India will have equal rights as citizens?', 'what is the end of education?' are asked along with slogans and statements like 'The land belongs to the ones who toil in it', 'there cannot be a nation without national education', 'be selfless for the mother-nation' are projected in the context of dramatized storylines portraying the dream.

Throughout the movie, Shankar acted as the protagonist, trying to provide a simple solution/ answer to all the questions that were coming to the fore in the matter of policy decisions regarding the shape and structure of the soon to be independent. Shankar's Brahmin, upper class upbringing and his extensive exposure to the west, did not make him very different from many of the policy makers, who also came from the similar backgrounds. But his stand, and critique of the directions that the national policies were taking, placed him in the opposite side of the turf, from the planners of the nation.

Is *Kalpana* an important part of dance history of the nation?

Institutionalized categories of dance remain curiously detached from the day to day issues and life-changing events in India, continuing to be largely unaffected and unreflective of processes and voices of change that are taken up in theatre, cinema, and visual art. Some dancers, who work on issues beyond the usual ones, feel more comfortable to call their performance dance-theatre. Addressing issues of gender, class, conflict, resistance directly or indirectly through abstraction has remained a marginal activity in dance even today. Works of Chandralekha<sup>8</sup>, Manjushree and Ranjabati Chaki Sircar<sup>9</sup> have been seen, written about as 'unusual' and 'out of the ordinary' as there was uneasiness about the specific socio-political concerns that these choreographers expressed through their works. What about Shankar's *Kalpana*? Where does one place it in dance history? Or is there even a need to do so? Does *Kalpana* need to be assessed as a milestone – where dance was used as tool for creating a resistant voice within the nation? Or was it at all a resistant voice – and how so? Dance in India, still remains largely comfortable within the mythic and mystic realms, where till date, the reference to *Shiva* as the creator of dance in the Indian context, becomes a part of the pre-performance announcements – while talking about the 'real'

history of Indian dance. Traditional mytho-social themes dominate the dance choreographies and solo presentations. Considered in the backdrop of such a scenario, *Kalpna* is modern beyond imagination – in the context of its creation, as well as in the context of today.

If one overlooks Shankar's problems with film as a medium, does *Kalpna* actually address and reflect question and struggles of the voiceless? As the issues of state/ nation/ strife for self-governance/ independent statehood/ various new degrees of exploitations/ industrial land-use and resistance from within communities/ Special Economic Zones and the political struggle, instances of army brutality and protests, take deeper toll on peace and sovereignty issues of the country today – a more engaged reading of *Kalpna* is necessary as the issues taken up in the movie- sometimes fleetingly and sometimes with immense detailing, reappear in everyday life of the nation which is now in its 63<sup>rd</sup> year of independent existence. It is also important to assess Uday Shankar's work – as a part of the modernizing processes in Indian dance, in line , continuity and the context of all the developments since– and not as a film, in the context of the film history in India, with all its problems in the hands of a first time director who was working solely on his own instinctive knowledge of the medium to give shape to his imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan in her book *Indian Classical Dances*, chooses to call the classical dances Neo-Classical, given the new and constructed history that justifies their inclusion as classical.

<sup>2</sup> Amala Shankar, who performed the character of Uma, the main female protagonist, and the love interest of Udayan, (portrayed by Uday Shankar himself), discussed the making of the film on several occasions with her students.

<sup>3</sup> Numerous discussions over a long time between me and Smt Amala Shankar have always brought out the element of wonder at the stage presence and presentational skills of Shankar as a performer, choreographer and presenter – and the tangible sense of awe of the western audience.

<sup>4</sup> *Zohra Unmasked*, Great Masters Series, documented by - Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Part 1&2 – contains Zohra Segal's discussion with Kapila Vatsyayan on herself as a dancer as well as an actress, and also throws light on the establishment of Uday Shankar India Culture Centre in Almora, and her association with it.

<sup>5</sup> Erdman, Joan L. in her paper "Who Remembers Uday Shankar?" presented at the annual conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars, Barnard College, New York, on June 21, 1997, discussed Uday Shankar's dance works and their acceptance, critically looking at his vision and achievements in the socio-cultural context of the Indian Dance scenario of the time.

<sup>6</sup> Times of India reports on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 2010: "Martin Scorsese, the director of American Classics Mean Streets, Raging Bull, Taxi Driver and Good Fellas on , and one of the founding members of the World Cinema Foundation dedicated to the preservation and Restoration of film classics, has decided to take up the cause of Uday Shankar's dance-ballet on celluloid, Kalpana. [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/ TOI Mobile](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/TOI-Mobile). Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> may, 2010. The renewed interest of the famous director suddenly triggered off a lot of reaction on print as well as audiovisual media, from film personalities, though the dance world and the government remain silent till now.

<sup>7</sup> In later years, till date, some of the dances were never recreated, as Amala Shankar felt that it was impossible to imagine anyone else in Uday's place in these dances.

<sup>8</sup> Chandralekha's intervention was at the level of the body as the tool – bringing in her concerns about sensual and sexual – and working on a parallel aesthetics tracing elements of understanding from yogic and tantric references, as well as the cosmic elements of body and dance movements. Analysing Chandralekha's dance Rustom Bharucha (2008: 3-18) writes, "Chandra's inventory is better served if it can challenge us to engage creatively with her points of reference to body, society, cosmos, and resistance, and to all those in-between states of consciousness and being that she loved to tease out against the grain of fixed categories and dichotomies."

<sup>9</sup> Ranjabati, with her mother Manjushree Chaki Sircar, within a short span of her dance career, brought to an unfortunate end by her death when she was only in her thirties, worked on developing dance as a tool for expression and communication , rather than a package of learnt and transmitted idioms, and took up issues of war, feminism, environment, etc in the choreographies created either solely by her or by the mother-daughter duo.

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