

6 Focus on India

For our international edition this year we have chosen to focus on community dance in India. We have been very fortunate in being supported by renowned dance critic and academic Dr Sunil Kothari who has guided us through this vast country and its multitude of dances and traditions.

He has helped us to make connections and build important bridges with dance artists and others concerned with widening access to dance.

In previous years we have looked at the USA and Australia, where history, language, definitions and values have been more easily comparable.

We in Britain have a similarly long relationship with India, however our relationship has been based in colonialism and notions of otherness. A relationship now complicated by post-colonial immigration to this country, where south Asian Dance has been firmly planted over the past fifty years as part of the British dance ecology.

We were interested in exploring how dance was part of social and cultural practice in India but little did we realise when we began, about the sheer

vastness of geography, the tremendous diversity of cultures and traditions and the glorious diversity of dances. Independence gave India the opportunity to reassert dance and the arts as part of the cultural identity of the peoples of this amazing nation, but of course this is now being influenced by political, economic and cultural manifestations from the West and to an extent vice versa.

Anyone who saw the opening and closing ceremonies of the last Commonwealth games in New Delhi in 2010 could not have failed to be in awe of the amazing range of dance styles and traditions the organisers brought to the party, far too many to name here, even if I could remember.

What these articles, gathered from across the country reflect, is how central to the individual and collective identity dance is in India. They show

how artists use dance and the arts to make a difference and transform the lives of individuals. They also reveal how the arts are changing the views of wider society about what people, historically seen and relegated to the bottom of the pile, can achieve.

It is important for us to recognise that work taking place in Britain under the banner of South Asian Dance has deep and important origins. There is still a close and developing relationship between our two countries and our two dance ecologies apart and together.

This selection of articles simply scratch the surface but introduce us to some of the people doing the work and some of the issues they are facing and using dance and the arts to deal with.

Ken Bartlett, Creative Director, Foundation for Community Dance

Below: Wonderful Beast production of Little Red Chunnii, with students Step by Step and Akshar school, Jaipur. Choreography by Anusha Subramanyam. Right: Kalbelia Dance, Rajasthan. Opposite: Saraikeela Chhau. All photos: Vipul Sangoi www.raindesign.info

