CHAPTER 1
UDAY SHANKAR AND LOCATING MODERNITY

In 1920, a twenty year old, handsome Indian student arrived in London to study painting at the Royal College of Art. Three years later, he made his debut at Covent Garden alongside the legendary Russian ballet dancer, Anna Pavlova, although—quite remarkably—until a few months earlier, he had little to no dance experience. His audiences in England, France, and the United States nevertheless thought he was very talented at what he did. The dancer invented a new style of dance, which purportedly represented Indian culture; his dance looked “foreign” enough that nobody doubted his claim.

In the late 1920s, the dancer returned to India, and demonstrated his new style to his fellow compatriots. Most of his compatriots did not care for this new style, but a few prominent figures encouraged him to continue with what he was doing. His family and friends also supported him; some of them even joined his dance troupe as dancers and musicians, including his youngest brother, twenty years his junior. The troupe then returned to Paris.

Meanwhile, India was nearing the end of its dramatic transition from a British imperial colony to a newly independent nation. When the dancer returned to settle in India in the late 1930s, he immersed himself in the current debates over India’s future identity and culture. Most people, who believed the essence of Indian culture could be found in its ancient traditions, were looking to the past for the “real” definition of national culture and identity. The dancer, however, proposed that his invented style and eclectic approach to art defined India’s culture instead. His style brought together a variety of different traditions that corresponded to the variety of cultures that the Indian
nation had united for the first time. The dancer thought, perhaps idealistically, that a new nation should have a new culture.

But people in India rejected his style of dance. As an altogether new form—one possibly incorporating insidious colonial influences—his dances could not represent what they believed to be “Indian culture.” In any case, others had discovered much older forms of dance, more legitimate than the dancer’s new style. In 1977, the dancer died a bitter, broken man and was soon forgotten.

But his youngest brother, whom the dancer had introduced to music in the 1920’s, became an internationally renowned musician, whose friendship with the Beatles and appearance at Woodstock made him an international household name. His brother continues to epitomize, outside of Indian food, many people’s entire understanding of Indian culture…

The dancer was Uday Shankar, older brother of the esteemed sitar player, Ravi Shankar. While Ravi gained worldwide and lasting recognition, history has banished Uday to obscurity.

Uday Shankar, who performed during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and in the United States, promoted himself as a modern Indian dancer—despite his long absence from India and lack of training in Indian dance. His career epitomizes the fraught terms of an ongoing debate regarding the question of modernity and identity in South Asian art and culture. Because Shankar worked mostly in Western countries, his career also brings up questions about the legitimate locations of South Asian modernity, and of South Asian identity itself. As one of the first South Asian artists to lead a transnational career, Uday Shankar prefigures the careers of more recent South Asian artists and musicians—including his renowned younger
brother—as well as the processes of identity formation associated with present day South Asian diasporic and transnational communities.

Uday Shankar’s ensemble and performances were temporally and conceptually entangled in the project to define a national culture that reflected India’s emergent status as a sovereign nation. India’s nationalist period is commonly understood to have begun in 1885 with the formation of the Indian National Congress, and to have culminated in India’s independence from Britain in 1947. Partha Chatterjee has shown, however, that as early as the mid-19th century, the Bengali elite in eastern India attempted to forge a distinction between Indian contributions and British contributions to their society. India was understood to control the domain of culture, while Britain controlled the economy, statecraft, science and technology. Toward this end, the Bengali elite created new forms of dance, music, and art that asserted India’s cultural “difference” from the British. These new forms emphasized India’s spiritual domain, the “inner domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity.”¹ Thus efforts to define Indian national identity began as a purely cultural project in reaction to British culture, but these efforts were inextricably indebted to the British presence as a foil against which Indian culture could be defined.

As a young Indian man sent to Britain to receive his education, Uday Shankar embodied the complex relationship between Indian and British identity. Launching and shaping his career in Europe and the United States, Shankar later attempted to import his vision of Indian dance and music into India itself. The challenges Shankar faced in his attempts to create modern

South Asian dance and culture were mired in the politics of nationalism, the role of tradition, and claims to modernity, but they were not unique to his career. The domain in which these definitions of Indian national identity and culture were established also extended beyond India’s borders. Shankar’s career, in particular, demonstrates how Europe and the United States delineated and produced modern Indian culture. These same challenges can be understood as still operating today. Recent South Asian artists and musicians have continued to struggle, as Shankar did, to define their identity and work in reference to respective cultural markers; furthermore, the instability of those markers—as found in music, fashion, art, and food—indicate that the project of defining any respective culture is a constant process. These cultural markers were significant during the anti-colonial struggle in South Asia because they represented the differences between South Asian and British culture that, in turn, constructed South Asia’s cultural identity. More often than not, these differences were expressed in terms of South Asia’s association with a “traditional” culture, and Britain’s association with a “modern” culture. Within the contemporary context of globalization, these markers continue to evoke the same associations as they did during the colonial period. As contemporary artists attempt to express a South Asian, modern identity in their work, they continue to confront the perceived opposition between a “traditional” South Asia and a “modern” Europe.

Uday Shankar was one of the first South Asian visual and performing artists to confront and negotiate the conceptual and cultural boundaries between “the East” and “the West” as they emerged in India’s early attempts
at sovereignty and self-definition; in the course of his own quest to define himself as the modern Indian artist, he set the terms of identity for later diasporic South Asian performers. In this chapter, I consider Shankar in the context of his participation in British and South Asian cultural interchange, and his role in defining the terms of identity that circulate among later visual and performing artists.

The existing accounts of Shankar’s life transmit a “larger-than-life” narrative that describes Shankar’s humble origins, sensational debut with Pavlova, and glamorous tours throughout Europe. These accounts sometimes incorporate physical evidence including surviving publicity materials, critical reviews, and concert programs. But for the most part, the accounts rehash slightly different versions of adulatory anecdotes from him, his family, friends, and acquaintances. I therefore use these accounts with some skepticism as sources in my own analysis.³

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To situate Shankar’s participation in British and South Asian cultural interchange, my chapter will begin with a historical context for Shankar’s position in Indian society. There I shall reveal the extent to which Shankar’s early education and career in London and Paris accords with Arif Dirlik’s concept of the “Orientalizing Oriental”—a theoretical model that describes how Asians participate in, internalize, and propagate Orientalist discourse. In the next section, I consider Shankar’s “Orientalizing” as he incorporated increasingly “Indian” sources to reinforce his ethnic authority. This section culminates in his return to India after a nearly decade long absence. After this return to India, Shankar proclaimed his vision of modern Indian dance and culture, and its role in the definition of national identity. I explore how his vision negotiated the delicate balance between tradition and innovation, and related to the emerging politics surrounding India’s cultural identity as an independent nation. In the last section of my chapter, I undertake a close reading of a live recording of one of Shankar’s concerts from 1937 in New York. In my conclusion, I define the terms of Shankar’s eventual exclusion from the debates surrounding the definition of Indian national culture and their relevance to the discourse surrounding contemporary South Asian visual and performing artists.

Orientalizing orientals

Uday Shankar’s work can be situated in a more general context of cultural interchange between Britain and India in the twilight of Britain’s rule over India. Several of Shankar’s early projects represent such cultural

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interchanges, including his collaboration with acclaimed ballet dancer Anna Pavlova. These collaborations appropriate and propagate recognizably Western Orientalist depictions of India. Yet, insofar as Shankar himself was Indian, his participation in these collaborations departs from typical Orientalist practice in important respects. In this regard, I refer to Arif Dirlik’s term, “Orientalizing Orientals,” as a model for Shankar’s participation in this cultural interchange. Dirlik cites the leaders of the Bengal Renaissance, the painter Abanindranath Tagore and the poet Rabindranath Tagore (Abanindranath’s nephew), as exemplars of the “Orientalizing Oriental.” As prominent cultural figures in India, (in Rabindranath’s case, both in India and Europe), the Tagores considerably influenced Shankar’s aesthetic development, particularly after Shankar met them in 1929.

Like many leading Bengali intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th century, the Tagores used Hindu traditions to distinguish the strength of India’s spirituality from European materiality, and to arouse nationalist, anti-colonial sentiments. This renaissance of traditions was, however, largely indebted to the work of 18th and 19th century British Orientalist scholars, who first “rediscovered” these ancient texts and proceeded to study and translate them. It was this British Orientalist scholarship that motivated Bengali intellectuals to study these ancient texts and develop their concepts of Indian tradition.

These Bengali intellectuals appropriated British Orientalist scholarship in a particular way that, according to Arif Dirlik, calls into question the extent to which the Tagores’ enterprise of defining “Indian tradition” could be distinguished from its Western Orientalist versions. Dirlik notes that while

\[5\text{Ibid.}\]
scholars often recognize the extent to which Orientalism had become a part of European and American culture by the early nineteenth century, they do not always acknowledge the extent to which Orientalism affected Asian societies. European and American concepts of Asia in the Orientalist mode, which were subsequently interpreted as the identity of “Asian traditions,” may well have been integrated into Asians’ understanding of their own culture. Dirlik argues that “Asian traditions” may be nothing more than “invented traditions... that owe more to Orientalist perceptions of Asia than the self-perceptions of Asians at the point of contact.” Dirlik thus concludes that any attempt to understand the discourse and practice of Orientalism must include Orientalism’s potential practice by Asians themselves. Furthermore, Orientalist practice performed by Asians amidst the transition between India’s colonial period and independence was instrumental in creating new conceptions of Indian identity, (and less obviously, British identity as well).

Uday Shankar also exemplifies the “Orientalizing Oriental.” Shankar received his primary introduction to “Indian culture” through English and European mentors; thus the formation of his own identity was largely shaped by Orientalist sources and their articulation of Indian traditions. He incorporated these Orientalist sources and influences within his performance style, and in doing so, arrived at what he viewed to be a legitimate expression of Indian national culture, outside India.

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6 This phenomenon was hardly unique to India, cf. the role of Dutch Orientalist scholarship in the defining of “Javanese traditions,” John Pemberton, *On the Subject Of ”Java“* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).
“Indian” culture in the early 20th century

Concomitant with Uday Shankar’s work, but geographically removed from it, was the of work India’s intellectuals, artists, and politicians, who were also constructing what they viewed to be an indigenous national culture. Some Indian visual artists, hoping to reform Indian art, incorporated indigenous styles of painting and references to Indian mythology. Others experimented with less illustrative genres and techniques drawn from Japanese brush painting, and European Cubism and Futurism.9 Within music, reformers attempted to standardize musical practice while retaining its “Indianness.” Janaki Bakhle notes that during the 19th century, music was for the first time transcribed in a standardized form; furthermore, its performance moved from private courts to public gatherings. Both these developments gave musicians new social respectability.10 Seemingly opposed to these processes of modernization, Orientalist scholarship in fact reinforced music’s alleged origins in ancient theoretical sources. Affirming these ancient origins enabled music to retain its “Indian” identity, and to assume more legitimately its role as the “primary bearer of India’s cultural nationalism.”11 One song in particular, “Vande Mataram” reportedly stirred strong anti-colonial, nationalist sentiment, causing the British in 1905 to ban the book that had published the lyrics—Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Anandamatha.12

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9 See Guha-Thakurta, The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850-1920, 314. See also Mitter, Art and Nationalism in Colonial India.
11 Ibid., 36.
During the 1920s and 1930s, bharata natyam, the most recognized of Indian classical dance traditions today, was resurrected through the efforts of two particular women, Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi (Arundale). Devi is particularly interesting because her early career, which she began five years later than Shankar’s, parallels his in many respects. Born into a high-caste Brahmin family in 1904 in Madras, she began ballet studies in 1928 with Anna Pavlova in Paris. In 1934, she returned to Madras to study bharata natyam from a traditional practitioner; she was determined to rescue bharata natyam from women of “ill repute,” and therefore established a school to ensure that the tradition was “handed over to women of quality” who could bring it respectability. Balasaraswati, on the other hand, who had been born in 1918 into a family of devadasis (lower-class ritual and artistic dancers in the temples and courts), was determined to safeguard the tradition that she considered as her own heritage, “not allowing it to be watered down, modernized, made more “accessible” or corrupted in any way.”

After India achieved independence in 1947, the state-run Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Indian Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama, gave certain dance traditions such as bharata natyam, kathakali, and manipuri classical status. These dance traditions, as well as certain musical traditions, were then literally governed by an official narrative of cultural heritage, which aimed to preserve and maintain extant traditions; these classical traditions were protected and

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15 See Erdman, ”Who Should Speak for the Performing Arts?”
nurtured to the expense of other traditions without classical status, such as popular or folk traditions. This official narrative redefined the origins of Indian heritage—and in turn, these traditions themselves—as ancient, classically Hindu, and without European influence.

For many years Shankar was separated from Indian debates on dance and music by his extended stay in Europe. Ironically, his first attempts to construct a national dance culture for India took place in Europe. After performing for audiences largely unfamiliar with Indian music, dance, and mythology, Shankar eventually realized the enormous responsibility he carried as a cultural ambassador. As the Indian nationalist movement developed in India, Shankar, in Europe, began to see himself and his vision of Indian culture as participating in the formation of India as a sovereign nation. A survey of Shankar’s career, insofar as it overlapped with the development of India’s own identity, highlights the terms of music and dance’s participation in the cultural interaction between the West and India that formed modern Indian cultural identity. In the next section, I shall briefly summarize Shankar’s early life and unorthodox initiation into professional dance, which highlight the complexity of European and Indian interaction associated with his career.

16 See Shubha Chaudhuri, "Aspects of Documentation and Mass Media: A Viewpoint from India," in World Music, Musics of the World: Aspects of Documentation, Mass Media, and Acculturation, ed. Max Peter Baumann (Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag, 1992), 234-37. Chaudhuri has noted that the survival and documentation of folk music has taken place largely in academic settings, most often in local folklore departments within Indian universities—of which few if any receive government sponsorship. Folklore studies are therefore disadvantaged by their lack of funding and access to information and expertise. Chaudhuri, "Aspects of Documentation and Mass Media,” 236. Scholarly interest in popular music in India has grown in recent years, particularly within the context of media studies, but the government in no way officially sponsors it.
Shankar’s early years

Shankar was born in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India in 1900 to a cosmopolitan, educated, and somewhat unconventional family. His father, Shyam Shankar, had received a law degree in England and a doctorate in political science in Switzerland; throughout Shankar’s childhood, he was often absent while serving as the foreign minister and advisor to the Maharajah of Jhalawar in Rajasthan. As a child, Uday Shankar demonstrated an early aptitude in both painting and dancing; the latter was associated with prostitution and the untouchable class and thus an inappropriate activity for high-caste Brahmins like the Shankars. Nevertheless, Uday’s mother, an art and music lover who longed for a daughter, encouraged Uday as a child to dress up as a girl and imitate the “street dancing of ahrs (vendors) and chamars (shoemakers) of the local villages.” As a young boy, he often crept away at night to observe performances of folk dances but never studied dance formally. As he grew older, he turned to painting, which he studied from 1918-1920 at the J.J. School of Art in Bombay. Immediately after ending his studies in Bombay, his father arranged for Uday to enroll in the Royal College of Art in London on a full-tuition scholarship. Uday Shankar left India at the age of twenty; he would not return to settle in India for another eighteen years.

Although Shankar devoted himself to painting at the Royal College, he also began to participate in public dance and theatre performances organized by his father. These performances, initially staged in intimate salons frequented by London’s elite, evolved first into war-relief benefits for injured

18 Ibid., 29.
19 Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 23-25.
Indian First World War soldiers, and then into general entertainment for wealthy British and Indian audiences. As these performances gained popularity, they moved on to larger, more prestigious venues. One such performance in 1923, at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, featured Shankar and his father in a piece titled “The Great Moghul’s Chamber of Dreams.” Tapping into the British audience’s enthusiasm for phantasmagoria, Uday shined light through painted glass slides to project fairies hovering over the stage. This early attention to lighting, special effects, and set design significantly informed his later work. Both the Orientalist theme of the piece and its production value convey Uday’s early proficiency in packaging Indian culture as a theatrical spectacle for primarily non-Indian audiences.

**Western Mentors on the East**

While performing in his father’s productions, Uday Shankar continued his painting studies at the Royal College, where his excellent academic record caught the attention of the College’s principal, the art historian Sir William Rothenstein. Rothenstein quickly adopted Shankar as his protégé. A connoisseur of Indian art and culture, Rothenstein had already cultivated close friendships with Indian cultural figures and advocates, including the Tagores and the art historian A. K. Coomaraswamy. Rothenstein was determined to pass on to Uday his own enthusiasm for Indian culture, but Shankar’s immersion in Western culture during his two years in London presented an obstacle. In comparison with Rothenstein and other British

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20 Ibid., 27  
22 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 36.
Orientalists, Uday was relatively unfamiliar with Indian artistic traditions. Such cultural ignorance was quite common in an era when many Indian elites believed that British culture defined cultural advancement; many members of the Indian elite were more conversant with Western culture than Indian culture.23 Although Shankar and his fellow students were imitating the Paris School and German Expressionist styles of painting, Rothenstein was determined to develop what he believed to be Shankar’s great potential as an Indian contemporary artist, one who incorporated Indian idioms. Rothenstein criticized Shankar’s experimentation with European techniques:

“I feel you are taking our disease to India… Please don’t do what you are doing. You know I have visited India and been with [Rabindranath] Tagore and traveled and marveled at your ancient paintings and sculptures. The soul of India can be seen in them. I want you to recapture that soul.”24

To acquaint Shankar with suitable Indian idioms, Rothenstein ordered him to take a month’s leave from the Royal College to study books on Indian monuments, temples, caves, paintings, sculptures, and crafts at the British Museum. After Shankar returned to the Royal College from the Museum, he began to incorporate within his work some of the historical painterly techniques he had studied, including Mughal miniature painting, which earned prestigious prizes at the College and a British scholarship for the Prix de Rome.25

Shankar, at the end of his life, credited Rothenstein with introducing him to Indian culture: “William Rothenstein … was the first to open my eyes

23 For an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon, see Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments, 88.
25 Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 25-27.
to the greatness and beauty of India and her arts.”26 Rothenstein and Shankar’s teacher-student relationship, wherein a British connoisseur tutored an Indian elite in Indian culture, re-enacts another early 20th century relationship between British art historian, E.B. Havell, and Abanindranath Tagore. In his journal, Abanindranath recalls his own tutelage with Havell during the years 1896-1903:

There was none to compare with my guru Havell in appreciating Indian art. Every day for two hours we would sit in a quiet corner while he taught me about Hindu sculpture and painting. There were strict orders that we were not to be disturbed... I still think that had not Havell taken so much trouble to teach me to love Indian art, I would probably have remained in the dark and without an appreciation of the beauty of the art of my own land.27

While Shankar soon after moved away from Rothenstein’s direct influence, their relationship, as well as the earlier one between Havell and Abanindranath, illustrates the transitional position of Indian elites, who had benefited by a long history of intimacy between themselves and colonial officials, but who were also, and ironically, spurred toward anti-colonial nationalist sentiment by colonial mentors.

William Rothenstein, however, was only the first of many Westerners who would help shape Shankar’s understanding of Indian culture. In 1923, Shankar was introduced to the Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova, who, having just returned from her first tour of Asia, was now residing in London. Pavlova had recently traveled throughout India to view live performances of Indian dance; she had visited temples and caves and witnessed various festivals and ceremonies, all of which inspired her to produce ballets on “Indian” themes.28

26 Interview with Uday Shankar, Quoted in Ibid., 25.(Date of interview unknown.)
28 Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 27.
Pavlova’s Russian cultural identity complicated her desire to produce “Indian” themes, mostly because Russia was not always considered to be part of Western culture.  

Pavlova set out to produce three miniature ballets: Ajanta Frescoes, based on the paintings in the Ajanta caves (a recent British archeological discovery); Krishna and Radha, based on the renowned lovers in Hindu mythology; and A Hindu Wedding. She lacked, however, a suitable dance partner—as well as a choreographer—for Krishna and Radha and A Hindu Wedding. An Indian friend then recommended Shankar to her; subsequently impressed by his audition, she commissioned him to dance and choreograph the remaining two ballets. Shankar was torn between painting and dance, and between his respective Western mentors. In the end, he chose dance. 

The field of dance integrated Shankar’s interests in visual art, set design, special effects, and the act of performance. According to his own self-mythologizing remarks, Shankar claimed he could adapt easily to Western dance practices. He professed that Western ballet and his knowledge of Indian painting were a seamless union; throughout his life, Shankar reiterated his facility in combining “the best of East and West” to create his identity as the “modern Indian artist.”

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30 Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 28.
For a few days I saw the group practicing and rehearsing and I was easily able to understand Pavlova’s requirement—I mean, how to cover space, make group formations, create and blend movement. Do not forget that I was a painter. Pavlova gave me, as they used to call them, ten big girls and ten small girls. I selected eight. The music was already there by Comolata. It was really no problem creating the pieces.31

The construction of these ballets as authentic “Indian” objects required Shankar’s expertise as a “native informant,” his visibility on the stage, and, in fact, Pavlova’s and his considerable research carried out in London museums. Shankar tells that he choreographed *A Hindu Wedding* from his own memories of weddings in Rajasthan, though many of the set designs originated in pencil sketches of paintings in the British Museum. The costumes for the production were designed according to 17th-century Indian miniature paintings in the British Museum, the Indian Office in London, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. These costume designs were then recreated with fabric that Pavlova had brought back herself from India.32

The composition of dancers in Shankar’s *Krishna and Radha*, as seen in the photograph, “Pavlova and Algeranoff [sic] with corps de ballet in Oriental Impressions,”33 enacts a *tableau vivant* that evokes *ragamala*, a historical genre of Indian miniature painting. The *ragamala* depict respective personifications of the musical modes, or *ragas*; the figures representing the modes are known as *ragasis*. *Ragamala* paintings, associated with 17th-century Rajput culture in northwestern India, feature flat landscapes, on which figures, animals, and trees are superimposed in a vertical arrangement.34 As shown, Shankar’s arrangement of the dancers on stage—Krishna (the figure with the flute) and

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31 Interview with Uday Shankar. Quoted in Ibid., 29.
32 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 49.
33 Plate III. Ibid., 51.
the chorus—forms a pyramid-shaped geometric composition on a vertical axis, as opposed to the horizontal axis typical of most Western ballet.

The “Indianness” of Shankar’s contributions was thus firmly established in careful research, Shankar’s own experiences, and his ensuing ethnic authority. In the section to follow, I shall interpret mostly British and some Indian critics’ reactions to Shankar’s “Indianness,” as conveyed through his live performances. In the eyes of many of these critics, Shankar’s dance failed to satisfy their expectations of an authentic Indian performance. These critics’ reactions demonstrate the difficulties that Shankar faced while pursuing his individual artistic vision, and at the same, projecting his Indian identity. The reality of Indian culture that Shankar defined in his performances often failed to coincide with the reality that critics wished to witness.

**Early Critical Reception: Representation, Realism, and Authenticity**

Pavlova opened her season at Covent Garden in September, 1923 with the “Eastern”-themed ballets, *Ajanta Frescoes, A Polish Wedding, Dionysus, Russian Folk Lore, La Fille Mal Gardeé*, and a suite of dances called *Oriental Impressions*, which included *Dances of Japan, Krishna and Radha* and *A Hindu Wedding*. The opening is significant in the attention it received from London newspaper critics; these critics’ focus on representation, realism and authenticity reveal the degree to which Pavlova and Shankar’s collaboration colluded with British imperialism. The audiences for *Oriental Impressions* were led to believe that they were seeing and hearing aspects of “real” Oriental life—dances as they were danced in India, music as it was performed in India.
This type of Oriental “reality” was visibly defined through elaborate recreations of India and other imperial possessions within the format of the colonial exhibition—recurrent shows in Paris, London, and other large cities that served as popular entertainment. The exhibitions in London, most of which were sponsored by the British government, were a means to gain public support for the British Empire. The Colonial and Indian Exhibitions of 1886 proclaimed that its purpose was “to give to the inhabitants of the British Isles, to foreigners and to one another, practical demonstration of the wealth and industrial development of the outlying portions of the British Empire.”

Alongside these government sponsored exhibitions were purely commercial ones, such as the Ceylon Exhibition of 1886. A review from The Times in July 1886 describes the Ceylon Exhibition and demonstrates how exhibitions of that time incorporated musical performances:

The Cingalese men are well-looking and well made, though somewhat slender and of low stature. The women are by no means comely, and very diminutive. The Tamils or natives of the Malabar coast, are a race of larger and more powerful physique and darker complexion. Both the Cingalese and the Tamils appear in their native dress, which in the case of the former is the scantiest... About forty members of the troupe divided into several groups, appear as dancers, play actors, conjurors, snake-charmers, and performers on the peculiar Cingalese instruments.

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As described above, audiences were as much if not more focused on the performers’ perceived racial differences than these performers’ actual activities on stage. The Ceylon Exhibition, prior to arriving in London, had already toured German, Austria, and Hungary. Participants in the exhibitions were described in scientific terms, in accordance with the nineteenth century colonists’ obsession with taxonomy; for them, the act of classification was a means of containing and controlling the world around them. As Jeffrey Richards has noted, exhibitions “functioned both as ethnographic curiosities and as confirmation of the theory of racial superiority which buttressed the European Empires.”

The emphasis on taxonomy was closely related to the colonists’ desire to represent other cultures as accurately as possible:

When it came to what lay beyond metropolitan Europe, the arts and the disciplines of representation... depended on the powers of Europe to bring the non-European world into representations, the better to be able to see it, to master it, and to hold it.  

Indian culture could only be transmitted to the British public through its being translated into British terms. Therefore entire villages and neighborhoods, including their inhabitants, were imported and reinvented on British soil. One could wander through an Indian village and witness dancing girls, a holy man, and street performers all without leaving London. But these staged, artificial realities in the exhibitions, as well as the performance of Pavlova and

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38 Richards, *Imperialism and Music.*  
Shankar, existed separately from the actual politics and culture in actual colonized countries at that time. Pavlova and Shankar’s production represented romantic, idealized images of India that had little or no connection to actual India. Moreover, for European audiences, these fanciful presentations of Indian culture could render the realities of India deniable, if not invisible.\(^{42}\) (These artificial representations of Indian culture within Britain emerge in a contemporary context in the guise of cultural fairs, which are discussed in Chapter 3—and to some extent, the consumption of Indian world music recordings by British audiences, which is discussed in Chapter 2.)

Critics, mostly unacquainted with classical Indian dance and music, consumed this artificial reality with the help of the physical presence of “real” Indians—namely Uday Shankar and Comolata Banerji—who together “authenticated” the set designs and choreography. *Ajanta Frescoes,* choreographed by one of Pavlova’s associates, elicited the most criticism because it did not overtly feature Shankar. Critics noted that Shankar “had little to contribute” to this production, and that the ballet, in fact, did not correspond to the frescoes upon which they were supposedly based.\(^{43}\) In *The Observer,* Hubert Griffith criticized the decision to choreograph a ballet based on the paintings:

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\(^{42}\) See Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity.”

\(^{43}\) The frescoes in the caves at Ajanta, from approximately 200 B.C. to 400 A.D, depict scenes from the life of Buddha; they were ‘rediscovered’ by British soldiers on a hunting trip in 1819, after which numerous attempts were made to copy the paintings for exhibition, and later, for publication. One of the most significant publications, appearing in 1915, presumably provided the source for Pavlova’s production: Lady Herringham and her assistants, (with introductory essays by members of the India Society), *Ajanta Frescoes, being reproduction in colour and monochrome of frescoes in some of the caves at Ajanta after copies taken in the years 1909-1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913.) Cited in Robert Ross, “Ajanta Frescoes,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 29, no. 160 (1916): 154.
*Ajanta’s Frescoes* is not very satisfactory – these crowded Indian wall paintings, in which the elephants alone are really excitingly drawn, are strange, and not quite happy, inspirations on which to found a ballet.\(^4^4\)

Griffith revealed his previous acquaintance with the paintings, through his reference to the elephants. Given that the paintings themselves do not connote a sense of narrative or movement in his eyes, Griffith questions the wisdom of basing a ballet upon the subject.

*Oriental Impressions* garnered slightly more enthusiasm, but critics were still guarded in their praise. The reviews of Shankar’s performances in the Western press often reveal unfamiliarity with Indian music, as in the following review by a reporter from *The Times*:

> It was difficult to get back to the frame of mind necessary to enjoy the more oriental realism in the two Hindu scenes... These were given to music by Miss Comolata Banerji, music in which long and wandering dance tunes with percussive accents and drones[,] cleverly devised in Western orchestration[,] produced effects which belong to the East. Again we are not prepared to see how far either the stage design or music are actual reproductions, and how far imaginative, but the second of the two, *Krishna and Radha*, certainly produced its own imaginative atmosphere.\(^4^5\)

This critic admits his inability to appreciate the more “traditional” (and therefore unfamiliar) Indian dance pieces and music. He appears, at least initially, to praise the “imagination” or creative license in this production, which distinguishes him from other European critics expecting a faithful reproduction of an authentic non-Western tradition. Yet that praise is based in Banerji’s ability to translate a sense of Indian music into more palatable Western instrumentation, in effect, creating a sense of “Oriental realism.”


\(^4^5\)Attributed to “*The Times*,” date unknown. Quoted in Ibid. While these performances would suggest that presumably transcribed for the orchestra, they are to the best of my knowledge either missing or unavailable.
When he admits that he found it “difficult to get back to the frame of mind necessary” for the “Hindu scenes,” the Times reporter suggests that he finds it difficult to negotiate the transitions from an “imaginative” world to a world of “Oriental realism,” perhaps because he cannot discern where one world ends and the other begins. His comments reveal a tension between his wish, on one hand, to praise the production’s realistic re-creation of the East, and on the other hand, to still convey his discomfort that the music may be too “authentic” and thus unpalatable. This sense of doubt as to what the authentic might constitute is significant; he is moved to note that unlike The Ajanta Frescoes, whose source was known to London audiences, the authenticity of the Hindu scenes in this ballet, the Oriental Impressions suite, cannot be verified. The critic’s praise for the ballet’s “imagination” suggests his unfamiliarity with what was presented—for if he had recognized more elements, he might have praised the ballet’s realism instead. His praise hints at the possibility that audiences’ and critics’ lack of access to other performances of Indian culture on which they could base more informed opinions may have worked to the Shankar’s advantage.

Another critic, from The Daily Telegraph, goes so far as to quote Kipling’s famous aphorism “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” as he questions the appropriateness of “Eastern” musical performances in the West:

Perhaps, it was not wholly wise to go to the East for music. In that field East is East and West is West. No doubt the tunes we heard were

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47 The quotation opens Rudyard Kipling’s poem, The Ballad of East and West.
genuine enough and beautiful. But there are artistic products which cannot be exported without losing their characteristic flavour. Commenting that the music “was genuine enough” of course implies that some aspects of the music were in fact not genuine at all, and in the next sentence he purports to explain why this authenticity is compromised—namely, the Western location of the performance. In doing so, he reveals his disdain at the music’s alien logic and implies its inferiority. Although this music and its contexts are unfamiliar, both critics’ remarks also reveal that they are judging the ballet music according to preconceived expectations of what a good piece of music should sound like, and how much they should enjoy that music—neither of which this alien music satisfies.

The critic from the Morning Post was, on the other hand, enthralled by the apparent realism in the Hindu Wedding:

The second Oriental impression was a Hindu wedding, which was solemnised literally. There was little movement, but a wonderful display of colour. The Nautch girls wore dresses of ravishing beauty. Their style of movement, too, was pleasing, and when the lights were up one noticed with satisfaction that English names were prominent in the list of dancers. The next impression, entitled “Krishna and Radha,” had no positive features except it brought in Madame Pavlova to dance. She moved and was lissom, and the dramatic significance vanished unnoticed. The impressions were well received, though all must have felt that their presentation borrowed too much leisureliness from the East.

In a similar show of cultural chauvinism, the critic found the pace of Krishna and Radha too “leisurely.” The comment evokes a common trope in colonial writing, in which representatives of the colonizing country bemoan the inherently lazy and slow dispositions of the colonized natives. The critic’s compliments for the English girls, and for their convincing transformation into

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48 Attributed to “The Daily Telegraph,” date unknown. Quoted in Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 34.
49 Attributed to “The Morning Post,” date unknown. Quoted in Ibid., 30-34.
Indian “nautch girls” or temple dancers, almost suggest that he believed that the costumed English girls made better nautch girls than Indian women, for they presumably performed these dances with greater vigor. Anne McClintock has commented on these English women’s freedom to “pass” and “cross-dress” as Indians within the context of British imperialism: “Privileged groups can, on occasion, display their privilege precisely by the extravagant display of their right to ambiguity.” 50 While European “cross-dressers” could choose to adopt Indian or other ethnic identities in a performance, Indian performers had a much narrower range of identities at their disposal.

Not much later, Shankar demonstrated the degree to which he himself internalized Western Orientalist chauvinism when he revealed his own preference for European women dressed as Indian women over Indian women themselves. His first dance partners after Pavlova were the two LanFranchi sisters, fellow defectors from Pavlova’s company (one of whom Shankar is rumored to have married).51 Surviving programs from their performances between 1925 and 1928 reveal the three appeared under a variety of Indian-sounding pseudonyms including “Umar Singh,” “Radha Rani,” “Navanita,” and “Gobu the wrestler.”52 Moreover, in 1928, Shankar chose his sixteen-year old French piano accompanist, Simone Barbiere, as his professional partner after he caught her imitating his dance movements. After he renamed Barbiere the ethnically ambiguous name “Simkie,” they performed together for nearly two decades.53 Shankar considered Simkie “the

50 Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995), 68.
51 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 59.
52 Ibid., 78.
53 Ibid., 94. It is unclear whether Simkie and Shankar were also romantically involved. Khokar offers this ambiguous comment: “[The two] made a splendid team, on stage, off stage. They seemed made for each other.” See Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 42.
only woman who embodied the qualities needed to convey the god-like choreography [--who was] better than any Indian woman I could find."\(^54\) Shankar carefully trained his non-Indian partners to move, dance, and appear as “Indian” as he did, to the point that European audiences often mistook his partners for Indians themselves. Photographic publicity postcards from that time captured Shankar and his partners in stylized dance postures, and in full costume.\(^55\)

Shankar’s early performances propagated an astonishing variety of Orientalist devices, as his first major solo concert in Paris reveals. Shankar performed at the Théâtre Comédie des Champs-Élysées on January 11, 1926.\(^56\) His program included twenty-two different selections, ranging from solo and group dances to orchestral interludes of an “Oriental nature,” and a piano solo.\(^57\) Most significantly, however, in his solo “Danse Nuptial,” Shankar entered the stage in a woman’s sari and ornaments. Because women were excluded from the stage in India, his cross-dressing was commonplace in an Indian context, but stirred controversy on the Western stage. Shankar’s convincing portrayal of an Indian bride surprised the audience and perhaps also affirmed the established Orientalist stereotype of Asian men as inherently effeminate.\(^58\)

\(^{54}\) M. Khokar interview with Uday Shankar, 1973; cited in Abrahams, "The Life and Art of Uday Shankar", 95.
\(^{55}\) See, for example, the postcard of Shankar and the LanFranchi sisters depicted on Plate XVI. Ibid., Plate XVI.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{57}\) Titles included “Danse du Diable,” “Danse Vaisya,” “Nautch,” “Danse de Shiva (Triomphe de la Destruction),” “Danse Traditionnelle de l’Épée” “Fleurs et Fruit (Danse Poulaire [sic]),” “Gandharva et Apsara (Danse de la Louer d’Indra [lasya et mouvement rituelle]),” “Indra (roi du Paradis, conduisant la Danse des Dieux)” Krishna et Radha,” and “La Mort du Bhil (boucheron).” Ibid.
Shankar’s performance was well received, but it also unsettled some viewers, as the following review from *La Tribune de Geneve* reveals:

Uday Shankar dances in a feminine costume, a Wedding Dance that is unique, in which the travesty has nothing of the suggestive or unpleasantness that it usually has. In these dances, sensuality is spiritualized, idealized to the point of losing all its qualities of embarrassment. Beauty, harmony, and the perfection of movement, and poise leave us completely absorbed and subjugated.”

This critic avoids admitting explicitly his appreciation for the sensuality of Shankar’s female performance because that admission could compromise his heterosexual subjectivity. He writes instead that Shankar’s performance transcends the “unpleasantness” the critic associates with (presumably) most performances in drag. After distancing himself from male cross-dressing and allusions to homosexuality, he is free to confess that he has been left utterly “subjugated” by Shankar’s performance.

Shankar’s erotic appeal thus played into Orientalist imaginings of India as the hyper-sexualized land of the *Kama Sutra*. Shankar and his partners, undoubtedly alert to this fact, publicized their concerts through posters and

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60 Anthony Lee’s study of Jack Mei Ling, a closeted gay dancer in San Francisco’s Chinatown performing amid the heyday of Hollywood Oriental films in the 1920s and 1930s, places Shankar’s performances, especially those in the United States, in an international context. Lee asserts that because Hollywood had recently issued a series of restrictive codes that “governed... how the races and sexes should interact on-screen, the only characters who could suggest forbidden pleasures and outlawed sexuality were the Orientalized figures... Orientalism therefore provided a basic vocabulary for exploring not only the imaginative hold on the East but also the desires against which... compulsory heterosexuality had set itself. In this latter sense Orientalism permitted a queer discourse, in that it enabled an exploration of difference from the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.” See Anthony W. Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 278. Philip Brett, in his discussion of kitschy turn-of-the-century English art songs with Indian themes, also mentions that the figure of the Indian body – evoked by the lyrics of these songs—would have a similar effect on its British listeners; the performance allowed listeners to allude to “species of erotic acts that they might have performed but could never admit to. These erotic fantasies, however, could be displaced onto an Indian persona.” Philip Brett, "Eros and Orientalism in Britten’s Operas," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 236.
postcards, many of these postcards, which featured Uday Shankar’s bare torso, emphasized such features as his musculature and virility, femininity, and “regal presence”—the last of which affirmed his purportedly unwanted title of “Prince Shankar.”

In these materials, he is usually billed as a “Hindoo-Dancer,” a label that should be placed within a historical context. Before the advent of the secular nation-state, any reference to “Hindoos” or “Hinduism” directly signified India for British audiences. This “Hindoo” moniker also followed in the tradition of British Orientalist scholarship, especially within the realm of music. The term “Hindu” within music appeared notably in the prolific writings of the Orientalist scholar, Sir William Jones. Jones believed all Indian knowledge originated in the *Vedas*, the ancient Hindu scriptures. In 1784, he published the first serious article on music entitled “On the Musical Modes of the Hindus,” which proclaimed the ancient origins of Indian music and affirmed its scientific approach and aesthetics. That single article came to be cited in almost every English article on Indian music by English and Indians alike for the next hundred years, so that by the mid-19th century, writers and scholars unanimously followed Jones in calling Indian music “Hindu.” The term “Hindoo” followed conventions at the time, but it also potentially evoked a distant classical past, divorced from the reality of British imperial subjugation of Indian culture and identity.

As his critics’ comments indicate, Shankar’s success appears to have been more a function of his ability to represent ethnic authority than any other

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61 These images are reproduced on Plates XI-XVI in Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 83-88.
63 See Bakhle, “Two Men and Music”, 167-69.
factor. To achieve success, his performances had to distract audiences from their surroundings and immerse them in an alternative, idealized, and apolitical reality—from which they derived pleasure. Any intrusions upon or interruptions of this pleasurable, apolitical reality resulted in a negative reception. These intrusions took the form of critics’ recalling previously encountered, and therefore “real” elements (as in the case of the Ajanta Frescoes)—or gaps between the critics’ expectations and actual experience. Overall, however, Shankar seems to have succeeded in constructing an authoritative “Indianness” in his performances for British audiences, despite his relative ignorance of Indian performance traditions—as they were recognized in India.

Shankar’s authoritativeness, at least during his very early career, had little to do with India as it actually existed. It was instead constructed through his ability to conform to his audience’s expectation of Indian reality, and it was this ability to conform that gave his audiences pleasure; that ability based itself on the perception of Shankar’s ethnic authority—their belief that Shankar’s ethnicity intrinsically constituted his cultural authenticity. Critics were more likely to blame their inability to appreciate his performances on their own ignorance, rather than on Shankar, whose ethnic authority initially helped him remain somewhat impervious to their criticisms. His critics’ displeasure during these early performances often signified the critics’ acute sense of cultural difference, which in turn even further validated the authenticity of the performance.

Although Shankar integrated textual references to Hindu mythology and elaborate Indian costumes into his performances, his audiences would eventually distrust Shankar’s cultural authority, which suffered from his
inability to incorporate indigenous Indian traditions in any substantive way. In his earlier performances, however, Shankar does not seem to have perceived his ignorance as a significant problem. For instance, in 1924, Shankar performed a dance that he titled *The Dance of Shiva, The God of Dance,* for the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley.\(^6^4\) The Exhibition was an immense affair, and in many ways, “the culminating exhibition of Empire.” Originally planned to take place in 1913, it had been postponed by the “Great War”; the war was seen to have vindicated the British Empire, and the exhibition functioned as an “affirmation of faith in the future.” A 216-acre site included countless attractions, including Palaces of Industry, Engineering, and Art; pavilions for dominions and colonies; a Wild West Rodeo; a full-scale reproduction of Tutankhamen’s tomb—and “a life-size Prince of Wales and his horse sculpted in Canadian butter.”\(^6^5\)

The Wembley exhibition’s Indian section alone spread over five acres and set out to convey a comprehensive representation of “The Brightest Jewel in the Imperial Crown.” Shankar’s dance was clearly meant to offer exhibition goers a glimpse of colonial Indian culture. Even the title suggested an authentic ritual. Shankar, however, later confessed that he had little idea what he was doing at the time, even as he represented the whole of India.

I danced the dance of Shiva. Music I myself gave to be composed [*sic*] and some good musicians were there who played the orchestra. As they played, I danced. Without knowing anything about Shiva’s dance, I just jumped around, most probably. What I did, God knows, but it proved a big success and they bravoed me. I could not realise why they liked it so much.\(^6^6\)

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\(^6^4\) Incidentally, Shankar’s participation in the exhibition at Wembley was not a unique event; he also performed in the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931. See Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 125.

\(^6^5\) Richards, *Imperialism and Music,* 194-95.

\(^6^6\) Interview with Uday Shankar, quoted in Khokar, *His Dance, His Life,* 41. This quotation cannot be assigned a specific date. Khokar’s material mostly stems from his informal personal
Shankar here openly admits his ignorance and lack of experience during his early career with one of the most well known of Indian classical dance themes. However, insofar as Shankar purported to be performing “modern Indian dance,” he was less of a charlatan than he may appear. Shankar’s astonishing capacity for invention (and self-invention) must be understood within the context of the fact that neither “Indian” identity nor “modern” identity was associated with fixed definitions. He was therefore involved in as honest an attempt as any other to define a South Asian modernity, however farcical some of those attempts may appear. His own ignorance of Indian performance traditions did however eventually become an increasing burden to Shankar. He therefore began to focus on the task of incorporating substantive references to previously defined Indian traditions. He set out to use these references to help strengthen his own cultural authority, and construct his self-image of the “modern Indian artist.”

From Shiva To Nataraj: The Accumulation of Cultural Authority

In 1923, A.K. Coomaraswamy gave Shankar a copy of his own book The Mirror of Gesture.67 However, a year and a half passed before Shankar opened the book. As he looked at it for the first time, he was immediately attracted to its photographs of different sculpture of Nataraj, the classical artistic depiction of the Dancing Shiva, the God of Dance. Having once concocted his own dance of Shiva, Shankar now proceeded to designate these artistic depictions

interactions with Shankar. In the tradition of a still substantial portion of published music “scholarship” in India, his book takes the form of a conversational homage to its subject, and refrains from citing sources according to American and European academic conventions. For similar biography, refer to Banerji, Uday Shankar and His Art. 67 Nandikesvara, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, and Duggirala Gopalakrishna, The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara (New York: E. Weyhe, 1936).
of Nataraj as his source of Indian inspiration, and in turn, his dance movements. Shankar explains,

This [traditional stance of Shiva] was not merely a pose but the centre of hundreds of movements that moved from one to another and finished with that pose... Later, this idea of movements radiating from a source and merging back into it I used in a number of my compositions.  

This quasi-mathematical system of radial movements came to define, for some observers, the structural principles of Uday Shankar’s future style. More importantly, this identification with Nataraj finally secured for Shankar, at least in his own mind, a concrete referent to an established classical Indian tradition, and to a solid perception of legitimacy.

Shankar’s discovery of the Nataraj foreshadowed his meeting with one of the foremost authorities on the Nataraj and its aesthetics, the Swiss sculptor Alice Boner, in 1929. Boner quickly assumed the role of Shankar’s major patron and mentor. Like Pavlova and Rothenstein before her, she, yet another Westerner, encouraged him to look to his own culture for artistic inspiration. She recommended that Shankar rely less on Western orchestration and instruments, and choreograph pieces based less on the tastes of American and European audiences, and more on “his taste,” which she presumed to be inclined toward Indian traditions. It seems that she intended to persuade Shankar to steer away from his characteristic amalgamation of Orientalist

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68 Interview with Uday Shankar. Quoted in Khokar, *His Dance, His Life*, 42.
69 “Each arm or semi-circle with its 180° has for its basic positions two right angles, position one and position two. Secondary positions are those between the two right angles, i.e. at 22 degrees in the arc. All other positions are related to these in fractions of right angles,” the mathematical equations of Shankar’s technique, as described by T. Paremshvanar Potty, *Centre News*, Vol. 3, no. 30, 12. Cited in Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 177.
70 This system of radial symmetry, also found in other figures found in temple sculptures, has been well documented by several scholars, and was researched most extensively by Alice Boner. See Alice Boner, *Principles of Composition of Hindu Sculpture* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), 38-49. Cited in Kapila Vatsyayan, *The Square and the Circle of the Indian Arts* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ (Printed in India): Humanities Press, 1983), 105.
references with European showmanship. She convinced him to return to India—for the first time in ten years—in order to gather an all-Indian company of dancers and musicians, as well as to observe, firsthand, dances, costumes, festivals, and local traditions in various parts of India.  

Uday Shankar traveled for almost a year throughout India with Alice Boner, from December 1929 through November 1930 as far north as Manipur, and as far south as Kerala; he also visited Java, Bali, and Sri Lanka. In addition to witnessing various live performances and festivals, he also studied figures carved in ancient temple sculptures, which inspired his choreography and costume designs. During this time, Shankar developed a new interest in musical instruments. He collected over fifty during this trip from India, Bali, and Sri Lanka. This trip “home” also afforded him the opportunity to reconnect with his family. For the first time Shankar engaged with his younger brother Ravi, then only nine years old. Over the course of this year, Shankar drew upon his friends and family to form an all-Indian troupe of musicians and dancers (including Ravi), with whom he returned to Paris in late 1930.  

This trip marked Shankar’s first extended encounter with Indian classical dance. He observed the classical dance tradition of kathakali during a temple festival in Kerala, and as in the case with the Nataraj from Coomaraswamy’s book, immediately identified it as closely resembling his own style of choreography. Shankar’s essentializing claim that this classical Indian icon was in fact very similar to his own naïve choreography effectively co-opted the style of kathakali for his own purposes; Shankar’s co-optation of classical Indian knowledge was paradoxically colonialist in intention and a

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71 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 96.
72 Ibid., 97-98.
proud affirmation of his Indian heritage. Shankar’s reported affinity with kathakali indicates his need to establish himself within the realm of tradition, and the realm of innovation, insofar as he claimed he had with his intuition already come up with a similarly profound style:

I could not believe what I was seeing. It was something of the kind I had been doing, without ever having seen or known Kathakali. The technique looked so much like mine. How it came to me I do not know. I decided there and then that if I ever got a guru, it would be for Kathakali. Not to learn the art, but to understand it.73

Shankar’s claim of course contributes to his self-construction of genius, which enables Shankar to identify the essence of Indian culture and traditions without any classical dance training; as he claims that he wants to “understand” art rather than “learn it,” he suggests that he has no need to learn the style because he has already learned the style on his own. It should be mentioned, however, that in this case his affinity was so strong that it motivated him to actually return to Kerala for six weeks to study the kathakali tradition with one of its most celebrated exponents, Shankaran Namboodiri.74

Although Shankar’s initial trip to India resembles his earlier forays into Indian culture, insofar as he conducted extensive research in Indian traditions and artifacts in order to reinforce his cultural authority, over the course of his first year in India, Shankar became increasingly conscious of the state of current Indian nationalist politics. During his fieldwork studying dance traditions and their sources, Shankar came to realize just how important cultural products were to the emerging national identity of India, and he also came to realize what role he might play in that definition. His desire to

73 Interview with Uday Shankar. Quoted in Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 51.
participate in Indian nationalism came out in a variety of ways even before Shankar returned to settle in India permanently in 1937. Through his interactions with Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore, which I will discuss in the next section, Shankar began his own project to define the modern Indian artist, positioning himself as the exemplar.

Defining the Modern Indian Artist

Shankar encountered Abanindranath Tagore for the first time in the context of a concert, which he performed in 1930 during his first return to India. Abanindranath’s subsequent praise for Shankar’s performance was especially significant because Abanindranath had successfully established himself as the “archetypal nationalist artist of modern India.” Abanindranath’s rise as a modern Indian artist in many ways foreshadowed Shankar’s own rise. As noted earlier, Abanindranath had initially studied Western painting only to later be introduced to Indian forms of painting through his tutelage under E.B. Havell, just as Shankar had in at the Royal Academy of Art and his subsequent tutelage under William Rothman. Tapatí Guha-Thakurta notes that in his own treatise on Indian art, Abanindranath distinguished himself as a genius, free from the trammels of education and rules, and professional and commercial demands... Instead his notion of a true artist came to revolve around a new hierarchy of values in art, placing... inspiration above training, self-expression above technical perfection, feeling above form.76

75 Tapatí Guha-Thakurta, "Recovering the Nation’s Art,” in Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 79.

76 Abanindranath Thakur, Bhārat Šilpa (Indian Art) (1909). Cited by Guha-Thakurta, "Recovering the Nation’s Art," 79.
Abanindranath’s definition of the artist as somebody who was not necessarily formally trained but was instead guided by instinct resonated with Shankar’s own practices, as well his capacity for self-mythologizing. Given the time period, it is unlikely that Shankar was not at least somewhat familiar with Abanindranath’s ideas; Shankar was almost certainly heavily influenced by them, and thus for Shankar to perform in Abanindranath’s presence was especially meaningful.

At this concert, which was held at the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Abanindranath introduced Shankar with praise for his simultaneous innovation and respect for tradition: “Your originality has gone to the rescue of a valued tradition that was becoming obsolete. Hence our rejoicing today—hence to you this offering of our gratitude.”77 After the performance, Abanindranath confessed that he had expected Shankar’s performance to be a crude “khichri” (a porridge traditionally made with leftover ingredients)—in this case a mixture of influences. Abanindranath was pleasantly surprised to find that Shankar retained what he believed to be an “Indian” national character, although Abanindranath had never seen anything quite like it:

When I heard that a dancer, male, coming after years in the West was going to dance, I came prepared to suffer some kind of khichri performance. But what I saw created a strange effect. It is nothing like what we see or know of and yet its soul seems Indian and very stirring.78

When Abanindranath proclaimed an Indian essence in Shankar’s dance, he effectively legitimized Shankar’s cultural authenticity. Yet, importantly, this authenticity was, paradoxically inextricable with something new, something “strange.” Shankar’s return to India just before independence

77 Abanindranath Tagore. Quoted in Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 51.
78 Attributed to Abanindranath by Uday Shankar, quoted by his brother Rajendra Shankar in Kothari and Khokar, Uday Shankar, 8.
facilitated, at least to a limited extent, his ability to present himself as the future “modern Indian subject” in India, and abroad. His status in India as an educated Westernized citizen in theory extended to him the authority to dictate the future development of Indian culture. Abanindranath’s approval, in the context of the Calcutta performance, enabled Shankar to begin creating the myth of himself as the innovative Indian modern artist who integrated the best of Western modernism with the best of indigenous cultures and traditions.

Uday Shankar later visited Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate poet and uncle of Abanindranath, who further articulated the terms of this new, modern cultural identity. Rabindranath met Shankar for the first time at his home and cultural center in Shantiniketan in 1929. In 1933, he wrote Shankar the following in a letter:

You have earned for yourself rich praise from the connoisseurs of art in different lands and yet I know you feel it deep within your heart that the path to the realization of your dream stretches long before you where new inspirations wait for you and where you must create in a limitless field new forms of living beauty. Genius is defined in our language as the power that unfolds over new possibilities in the revelation of beauty and truth. It is because we are sure of your genius that we hope your creations will not be a mere imitation of the past nor burdened with narrow conventions of provincialism.79

Rabindranath here recognizes Shankar’s international fame, but he also states his hope that Shankar continues to develop the depth of his artistic expression in original, creative ways. He advises that one should not attempt “to define [greatness] as either Indian or oriental or occidental.” One should, according to Rabindranath, appeal instead to supposedly universal ideals of beauty, truth, greatness, and genius. His rhetoric of universal ideals, another

79Letter from Rabindranath Tagore, Shantiniketan, 1933. Quoted in Banerji, Uday Shankar and His Art, 62-63.
example of late imperial cultural interchange, takes its lineage from 19th-century English Romanticism. Bengali literary scholars frequently call Tagore “the Shelley of Bengal”; one scholar, Viktors Ibivulis, has stated that Tagore first identified the “merging of a human being with the world around” in 19th-century English Romantic poetry, which would heavily influence his later conception of the “Universal Man.”

Later in this same letter, Rabindranath discusses what he viewed to be India’s cultural decline from a vibrant, active artistic society to its current stagnant state. He attributes this decline to overly conservative traditionalists attempting to preserve what had to have been, given India’s hybrid origins, a corrupt original. He also indirectly attributes the decline to colonialism, which had separated India from its “buoyant” spirit. Rabindranath then echoes Rothenstein’s plea that Shankar refrain “from taking our disease [of Western influence] to India” and to “recapture the soul of India” instead. Rabindranath also associates this decline—this loss of heritage—with “disease” and illness. He therefore charges Uday Shankar to use dance to awaken the consciousness of the Indian people to the value of their own culture.

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On Reforming Indian Tradition

Rabindranath and Abanindranath’s previous comments on the state of dance are better understood within the larger context of contemporary developments in traditional dance, and Shankar’s own participation in those developments. Traditional folk, religious, and classical dance were widely performed throughout India during the 1920s and 1930s. However, these respective dances were only known within their local area, and were rarely presented in a formal concert. A few artists and dancers advocated for specific traditions, such as manipuri, kathak, bharata natyam, and kathakali; while these artists and dancers were somewhat influential on a national scale, most people continued to disregard dance as a legitimate art, certainly not an art that constituted a national culture. Dance was a local community activity with limited relevance, and it could not be accepted as a legitimate art and profession in itself.

Shankar therefore generated some controversy when during his first trip to India in 1930, he publicly insisted that dance constituted an integral expression of Indian culture. He proclaimed that any legitimate program of social progress and modern development had to include a plan to revitalize the traditional dances in India. Endowing dance with such political significance was unprecedented in India, but Shankar felt that the dance was an art in itself, and in turn, an expression of Indian culture worthy enough to develop as a part of the project to define a national culture.

Shankar’s efforts to legitimize the status of dance in India were partly a result of his exposure to American and European dance performances; in the United States and Europe, classical forms dance were unequivocally recognized as a high art form. Dance in India was conventionally judged in
terms of how closely it was perceived to preserve previously established forms, but Shankar wished that Indian dance also allow for and recognize the merit of individual expression. Shankar’s emphasis on individual expression was partly a function of Shankar’s incorporating 18th and 19th century European ideals of the artist genius. Paul Guyer notes,

> At the outset of the eighteenth century [in Europe], genius was characterized simply as exceptional facility in perception and representation, where the latter is the object of artistic production and the former its precondition. As the century progressed… it came to be characterized as a gift for invention, leading to originality in artistic representation.\(^\text{83}\)

Shankar focused on dance as a vehicle of individual artistic expression, rather than as a reproduction of an established tradition, or incidental accompaniment to another art form. Shankar, however, also acknowledged the more commonly valorized aspect of “high” Indian culture, namely the preservation of tradition; he pronounced that the revitalization of dance should not require the sacrifice of Indian values and aesthetics.\(^\text{84}\)

**Realizing the Ideal: The Uday Shankar India Cultural Center**

Shankar pursued some of his desired reforms in his later career, most notably through the planning and operation of a national dance school. Shankar’s first trip to India in 1929 had inspired him to open a school and cultural arts center in India. He began to organize and plan the school just two years later. A document stating the school’s purposes conveys Shankar’s

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\(^\text{84}\) Abrahams, "The Life and Art of Uday Shankar", 100-01.
continued interest in legitimizing the art of dance as part of India’s national culture:

[T]he traditional and folk forms of Indian dancing and music should be studied … to establish definite standards of production… [and rediscover or recreate] the harmony underlying the seemingly confused state of India’s dance arts …In this connection, the importance of costumes, stagecraft and make-up is given special emphasis…[A dancer ‘s background should include] music, acting and some knowledge of the graphic arts, mythology, the history of art and the rich heritage of India’s spiritual teaching. [This]…will raise the institution from a mere dance and music school to a Cultural Centre in the true meaning of the term… [Upon completing their course, students should have acquired an] understanding such as in the past gave rise to the wonderful traditions and artistic attainments for which India is still known and admired all over the world…

Here, Shankar places less emphasis on students’ being innovative, and heavier emphasis on their acquiring a rigorous foundation in the traditional arts and being exposed to a more holistic introduction to so-called Indian culture. However, his mentioning the need to recreate “harmony” within the presently “confused state” of contemporary Indian dance, suggests an intention to weaken the conventional, and perhaps artificial, boundaries between classical and popular forms of dance, as well as between different artistic mediums. In this vein, he suggests that students must study and integrate a wide range of artistic traditions and disciplines if they are to do justice to India’s rich cultural heritage.

The document also reveals, however, Shankar’s desire to establish his reputation and legacy with a conservatory type school within India. His vision of the school was most closely modeled upon Leonard Elmhirst’s actual school—Dartington Hall, in Devon, England—which Shankar repeatedly visited in the mid 1930s. Dartington Hall offered classes in drama, dance, and

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85 Catalogue, Uday Shankar India Culture Center (no date.) Quoted in Ibid., 158-59;
music, along with some general education classes. However, Dartington Hall had been modeled on Rabindranath’s own education center, Santiniketan, where Elmhirst lived for many years. And Elmhirst had helped Rabindranath establish Santineketan’s sister school, Sriniketan, which concentrated on agriculture research and education. Shankar’s desire to establish his own school thus followed in an established series of intercultural exchanges between Britain and India.

Shankar’s wish to establish a school can also be situated among more contemporaneous, local developments—specifically, the emergence of schools devoted to Indian dance. The Kerala Kalamandalum was established in 1929 to preserve and propagate local traditions of dance and drama, which included the study of kathakali. More recently, Rukmini Devi had in 1936 opened Kalakshetra, a school devoted to bharata natyam, in Madras. Shankar hoped that his school would provide an environment that would illuminate dance’s integral relationship to other recognized artistic disciplines, and in doing so, legitimize dance itself. Shankar intended to codify the terms of that relationship through the school’s curriculum, which, moreover, sanctioned the study of dance as a recognized academic discipline. While other schools of dance existed, Shankar’s school was unique in its intent to incorporate different traditions of dance, and liberate these different forms of dance from their previous role of propagating respective traditions.

Shankar believed that this codification, along with dancers’ additional training in costumes, stagecraft, and make-up, would succeed in establishing Indian dance as an activity as universally respected and admired as European

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86 Shankar, Raga Mala, 73-74.
87 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 161.
ballet, for instance. Shankar’s exposure to and participation in elaborately staged dance performances in Europe motivated him to attempt to refine the technical production values of dance in India. Dance’s performance on the concert stage was at this time a relatively new phenomenon in India. While Rukmini Devi had instructed her dancers to wear expensively stitched costumes and ornamental jewelry to distinguish her students from those who she considered to be common *devadasis,* Shankar was one of the first to pay significant attention to stage production elements including different lighting techniques, set design, and special effects, in addition to costume design. His lifelong experimentation with these different elements demonstrates his belief that these features were vital to a successful performance, and through his school’s curriculum, Shankar wished to establish these elements as an essential component of dance performance in India.

Shankar’s dream was realized when the Uday Shankar India Cultural Center opened in its idyllic location in the Himalayas (in Almora, United Provinces) in March 1939. It offered a five-year program of study, after which students earned a diploma; surviving newsletters and other documents record an extensively detailed and creatively organized curriculum. The school accepted its first 21 students in 1941. The school’s policies reflected Shankar’s idealistic aspirations: the school was open to anybody who wished to attend, and full tuition scholarships were available for talented, economically disadvantaged students. However, Shankar and his staff found these ideals increasingly difficult to maintain with regard to the school’s actual operation. The school ran successfully for three years before financial problems and

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administrative conflicts forced its closure in early 1944. 89 This failure distressed Shankar for the rest of his life.

In a series of articles in a newspaper in the 1950s, years after the school closed, Shankar restated his philosophy of dance that had guided his vision of the school. The following excerpt from one of those articles encapsulates Shankar’s views on the respective roles of tradition and innovation in modern Indian art and culture:

The essence and soul of the art of Indian dancing... is spiritual, which is the guiding element in all Hindu art. A modern scientific way of presentation becomes imperative and inevitable to exhibit a theory of beauty and a piece of aesthetics. I apply it with folded hands and apologies to benign tradition and techniques. I respect unalloyed tradition untouched and not disfigured by the whims and ignorance of the artists. With regard to traditional dancing... let that be placed on a high alter as an ornament, but [it] should not be dragged down from the pedestal. It will not be able to bear the storm of modernism. I stress that the artist is a true artist when he can create something new, something beautiful. The history of dancing shows that the tradition has consistently grown and expanded... with the passing of time [emphasis added]. 90

In this passage, Shankar reveals the tensions inherent in his wish to innovate traditional dances without overly offending those who wished to preserve these traditions.

But overall, he argues for the need to introduce growth and expansion into dance. He recommends that traditional dancing be preserved and protected, but only as a historical artifact; Shankar states that these artifacts are irrelevant to the modern age if they are not actively translated into the

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89 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 152-84.
90 Uday Shankar, “To the Artist,” Amritsar Pratikar Bazaar 71, 93-96, 1956. Quoted in Ibid., 175. Abrahams notes, “Authorship is attributed to Shankar, but the caliber of English suggests that his comments were heavily edited by the newspaper, although the thoughts are Shankar’s, as substantiated by other interviews.”
present—through Shankar’s own contributions. It is this act of translation that will transform the essence of these traditions so that they may be relevant in the present—and modern. The need for these traditions to be translated explicitly alludes to Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of the translation of anachronistic “prior knowledges,” referenced in the Introduction.  

Shankar’s reference to “unalloyed tradition” implies that an artificially purified and preserved tradition cannot and should not engage with the present; the “alloy” relates to Shankar’s regular practice of integrating existing traditions with contemporary innovations, and his opinion that this integration strengthens the existing tradition—in the same manner that an the integration of another material within an alloy often strengthens a pure metal. (Shankar never neglected an opportunity to situate his own contributions within his philosophy of dance, and thus contribute to the construction of his own myth.)

Shankar opens this passage with his opinion that spirituality forms the essence of Indian tradition, although he goes on to claim that this tradition, like traditional dancing itself, must be systemized and standardized. This reference to spirituality as the essence of Indian tradition is one that explicitly echoes Abanindranath Tagore’s earlier statements that spirituality was the distinctive feature of Indian art. Also following Abanindranath, Shankar considers it the role of the artist to translate this essence into forms suitable for the modern age; therefore he asserts that art must incorporate “science” to maintain its relevance. But at the same, Shankar argues that art must also

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92 Thakur, Bharat Silpa. Cited by Guha-Thakurta, "Recovering the Nation's Art," 79.
retain its spiritual essence to be considered modern Indian art. In doing so, he reveals his consciousness of and participation in contemporary artistic discourse as well as in larger political debates concerning India’s emerging identity; lastly, he also reveals his desire to insert dance, and thus himself, within those debates.

References to “science” in early Indian nationalist political discourse were couched in the desire to preserve India’s cultural essence (its perceived strength) and, simultaneously, promote modernization. Jawaharlal Nehru, the nationalist leader and future prime minister, expressed this desire most eloquently:

The scientific approach and temperament are, or should be, a way of life, a process of thinking, a method of acting and associating with our fellowmen… Science has dominated the western world and everyone there pays tribute to it, and yet the west is still far from having developed the real temper of science. It has still to bring the spirit and the flesh into creative harmony.93

The intersections between Nehru’s and Shankar’s respective views establish the degree to which Shankar believed in modern dance and art’s central role in the development of national identity and culture. Shankar and Nehru both believed in the need for Indians to adopt a more modernized way of life, one that would afford Indian culture respect and admiration within Europe and the United States. However Shankar and Nehru also warned of the danger inherent in adopting a cold, lifeless scientific approach because such an approach would most likely overwhelm and/or exclude the vital presence of the “spirit,” which may be understood as an essentialist formulation of Indian identity. Nehru’s references to science and spirituality can therefore be seen to

correspond with Shankar’s missions to modernize and promote Indian dance as an integral part of the national project; Shankar’s readiness to lead the modernization of dance testify to his intense desire to participate in that developmental process.

Innovative Fusions: Documenting a Musical Legacy

Although Shankar himself was primarily a dancer, his innovations in music remain the most tangible record of his views on the role of tradition and innovation in modern music, dance, and art. They also demonstrate how Shankar’s vision of music and dance related to his vision of new Indian cultural identity. Uday Shankar had very little experience with music before he began to dance, but even his first collaborations with Pavlova reveal a keen understanding of music’s role in constructing “Indianness.”

His initial experiments with musical orchestration and composition were determined more by limitations than anything else. With respect to Shankar’s performance practice, his early concerts relied on European orchestration and piano accompaniment, rather than traditional Indian instruments. This orchestration derived most likely from the fact that few Indian musicians could be found in Europe at that time.\textsuperscript{94} To work with European musicians, he had most of his music notated by European composers and arrangers; some of these musicians provided original music, but most were reportedly hired to transcribe Shankar’s ideas. Shankar appears to have used only one published composition, for his “Danse Nuptiale.” (That composition, \textit{Two Hindoo Pictures}, was composed by A.W. Lotter and Adolf Hansen, and published in 1918 by Hawkes and Son of London and New

\textsuperscript{94} Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 73.
York.) Yet Shankar’s desire to experiment with different orchestration and arrangements appears to have had a lasting effect on his work; his ingenuity in using a limited range of instruments in new, untraditional ways carried over into his later career, even after he had gathered an all-Indian troupe of musicians and an impressive collection of indigenous instruments.

Despite Shankar’s many performances, few concrete records remain of Shankar’s actual performance practice. Thus the history of his career is told largely through personal anecdotes, publicity materials, and newspaper articles reviewing his performances. Shankar’s widow, Amala Shankar, and daughter, Mamata Shankar, both continue to lead troupes of dancers, and they claim to carry on his tradition; some of his and his wife’s students, including his daughter-in-law Tanushree Shankar, also proclaim their ties to the “Uday Shankar method of dance.” However, they all do so in radically different ways.

His method of dance, based on Shankar’s highly personal approach and, in many cases, spontaneous improvisation, is thus largely lost. One substantial testimony to his choreography and performance practice does survive—Shankar’s 1949 feature film Kalpana. Kalpana, a dance drama, was a thinly disguised biography of Shankar’s life, which he himself directed and starred in with his wife Amala. Kalpana has received only rare screenings since its initial release in 1949, largely due to the Indian government’s failure so far to procure the rights for the film from a private owner.96

95 Ibid., 76.
96 The film was screened a single time at Lincoln Center in May 2003 as part of a film series on international dance. Organizers for the screening, which I attended, related that the Indian government might soon acquire the film, and arrange for its release and proper preservation. The film was an extraordinary achievement, especially in the context of its being produced in the tumultuous period immediately before India’s independence in 1947; it includes no fewer than 80 different dance sequences, and incorporates special effects that were very advanced for its time. Kalpana received favorable reviews upon its international release in 1949. The
The other central document of Shankar’s career, which I shall now look at in depth, is a live recording of a concert from 1937 in New York. This recording was publicly released in the States in January 1938, and re-released on a RCA Victrola LP in 1968.\(^7\) The recording on its own of course fails to capture the visual components of Shankar’s performance, so it cannot convey the distinctive choreography lighting, scenery, costumes, and other visual aspects associated with Shankar’s dance performances. Yet the recording reveals another facet to Shankar’s work, now overshadowed by his younger brother Ravi’s prominence, namely Uday Shankar’s significance as a musical pioneer in his own right. The musical fusion captured in this recording in many respects realizes his goals and aspirations to create a hybrid tradition for the new Indian nation. In the next section, I shall examine this recording to illuminate how it articulated Shankar’s vision of a national culture. In my conclusion, I shall revisit this recording to consider Shankar’s legacy on South Asian fusion music and performance.

The recording is an entire live performance, played by an ensemble including Vishnudas Shirali (the Music Director), Sisir Sovan, Rabindra (Ravi Shankar), Dulal Sen, Nagen Dey, and Brijo Behari. Shankar had by this time choreographed a large number of works, so this recording does not in any way represent the whole of his repertory; we can guess however that the works presented on this American tour represented some of Shankar’s most successful numbers, particularly those numbers popular with Western audiences. The songs are brief; the longest selection is four minutes and

distinguished film director Satyajit Ray claimed that *Kalpana* was a significant influence on his own career; he viewed it sixteen times.

nineteen seconds, and they span a variety of different musical genres and orchestrations.

Table 1.1 Sequence of selections on *Indian Music: Ragas and Dances*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Orchestration</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Raga Tilanga</td>
<td>Sitar, Esraj, Flute, Sarangi, Gongs</td>
<td>4:07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Raga Bahar</td>
<td>Sitar, Sarod, Tabla, Sarangi</td>
<td>4:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Danse Gandharva: Raga Malkauns</td>
<td>Sitar, Sarod, Esraj, Sarangi</td>
<td>4:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Danse Ramachandra: Ragas Sinhendra-Maddhyama, Hansaddwani</td>
<td>Tanpura, Sitar, Flute, Sarod, Mridungam, Khunkhuni</td>
<td>3:58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Tabla-Taranga: Raga Adana</td>
<td>“Played on Twelve Drums by Vishnudass Shirali”</td>
<td>4:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Danse Kartikeyya: Raga Malkauns</td>
<td>Jala-Taranga, Flute, Sarod, Sarangi, Gongs, Shankh, Zhanzha</td>
<td>3:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Danse Indra: Raga Bhairava</td>
<td>Sitar, Sarod, Flute, Tabla, Esraj, Sarangi</td>
<td>3:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Danse Snanum: Ragas Durga, Khamaj</td>
<td>Jala-Taranga, Flute, Sarod, Sitar, Modal, Kohl, Khunkhuni</td>
<td>3:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Bhajana (Religious Song)</td>
<td>Flute, Sitar Sarod, Tabla, Karatal; Sung by Vishnudass Shirali</td>
<td>3:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Raga Mishra-Kaph</td>
<td>(Sarod, Tabla, Esraj)</td>
<td>3:26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pieces alternate between the purely instrumental pieces (Nos. 1, 2, 5, 9, and 10) and those that accompany actual dancing (Nos. 3, 4, 6, 7, 5, and 8.) The accompanying liner notes briefly explain that the pieces’ melodic material corresponds to recognizable ragas.

These brief pieces, however, radically depart from the traditional extended improvisatory forms associated with Indian classical music, in which a single piece could last over an hour. If Shankar had presented a traditional program consisting of one or two longer works, he would not have
been able to present as much variety. More significantly, these extended forms
in Indian classical music would have undoubtedly overwhelmed
inexperienced Western audiences. Years later his brother Ravi would also
truncate the performance of ragas to suit Western audiences.

The music in Shankar’s performances was almost entirely pre-
composed. Shankar himself had no formal training in classical Indian music
and often disagreed with the music his musical director, Vishnudass Shirali,
provided for him. Working together, they devised a method of composition in
which Shankar would describe what effect he wanted, and Shirali would
provide an appropriate accompaniment and instrumentation for respective
moments, especially those relating to narrative highpoints.  

Shankar’s musical material was a mix of both Northern and Southern
classical styles. The Southern classical or Carnatic tradition accompanies the
kathakali dance, the one tradition in which Shankar had some formal, albeit
brief training; Carnatic music also accompanies bharata natyam dance. Yet the
ragas listed on the recording all hail from the northern, or Hindustani, classical
tradition, as do most of the instruments played on the recordings. North
Indian classical dance—including the Odissi tradition native to the eastern
state of Orissa—are usually accompanied by rhythmic and melodic
instruments repeating 4, 8, or 7 beat cycles; these melodies are either repeated
or improvised upon in such a way that complements rather than distracts

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98 Abrahams, “The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, 140-41. Shankar and Shirali’s cooperation
raise the issue of which one of them would be credited as the original composer. Within this
particular concert, there are no mentions of any composers—presumably in order to suggest
the “traditional” source of these pieces.
99 Rolf Groesbeck has however argued that the music associated with kathakali performance in
Kerala is not Carnatic. He situates it as closely related to Brahmanical Temple music traditions,
which he considers as distinct from Carnatic music traditions; most scholars still maintain that
it is not distinct, but rather a regional variety of Carnatic music. Rolf Groesbeck, “”Classical
Music, “Folk Music”, and the Brahmanical Temple in Kerala, India,” Asian Music 30, no. 2
(1999).
from the dancer’s explication of respective narratives.\textsuperscript{100} The pieces in Shankar’s program were however mostly likely at least partly through-composed on the basis of their fitting within the three to four minutes allotted to each selection.

As the chart above indicates, the pieces use a variety of different instruments, none of which are recognizably European. The instruments are often combined in unconventional ways, and often played with unconventional techniques. In his autobiography, Ravi Shankar recalled his own experiences performing in his brother’s troupe. Ravi Shankar describes his brother’s innovative approach to instrumentation:

Uday invented an entire new dimension in both concept and sound by using all sorts of classical, folk, and tribal drums, cymbals, gongs, and little finger symbols like castanets made of metal or wood, and by devising new ways to play traditional instruments, playing the \textit{tamboura} with two sticks, for instance.\textsuperscript{101}

While six of the pieces on this recording conform to traditional Indian classical and folk idioms in style and instrumentation (\textit{Raga Bahar, Danse Gandharva, Danse Ramachandra, Danse Indra, Bhajana,} and \textit{Raga Mishra-Kaphi}), the remaining four, which use “gongs” as well other instruments, evoke gamelan music from Java and Bali. Shankar kept a detailed diary from his 1935 “research trip” to Bali, which includes references to watching Javanese dancing in Bandoeng. He specifically mentions the \textit{kebyar} dance, village dances, \textit{kecak}, the \textit{Kris} dance with swords, \textit{wayang wong} dance drama, and the

\textsuperscript{100}Steven Andrew Curtis, E-mail correspondence, August 30 2005. See also Bonnie Wade, \textit{Music in India: The Classical Traditions}, Revised Edition, Paperback ed. (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001). The South Indian tradition of \textit{bharata natyam} also integrates a considerable amount of improvisation, especially in the rhythmic accompaniment to improvised sections of the dance.\textsuperscript{101} Shankar, \textit{My Music, My Life}, 65.
wayang kulit shadow play.\textsuperscript{102} His detailed notes on instrumentation and music undoubtedly influenced his later experimentations with musical fusion.

Shankar’s compositions follow a number of Indian classical conventions when it comes to their melodic and rhythmic material. First of all, Shankar explicitly refers to the raga, which is “not a tune, nor… a ‘modal’ scale, but rather a continuum with scale and tune as its extremes,” as Harold Powers has noted.\textsuperscript{103} While the compositions rarely include an extended improvisation that gradually outlines the tonal structure of a respective raga, Shankar’s compositions do follow the raga in their pitches and their melodic contours, as their titles on the recording would indicate.

Some of the recorded pieces use an Indian classical approach to rhythm, namely regularly measured rhythmic cycles that cadence on the first beat of the next cycle, called the sam; the cycles themselves are known as tala and may be measured in four, six, seven, eight, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, nineteen and other numbers of beats. Other pieces included on this recording do not use any sort of rhythmic cycles and thus depart from traditional classical forms.

The first selection, Raga Tilanga, opens with an animated introduction, played in unison by the sitar, sarod, esraj, flute, and sarangi, with tabla accompaniment, as shown below. The piece introduces the melodic motives in a pseudo-improvisatory way by gradual additions to the initial three-note ascending motive, one note at a time, in the first four measures. In measures 8-11, we hear the melodic material for the upcoming tihai, or a melodic phrase

\textsuperscript{102} The diary is reproduced in its entirety within Abrahams, "The Life and Art of Uday Shankar", 262-66.

that repeats three times to conclude on the first beat of the rhythmic cycle, the *sam*. The melodic motive that comprises the *tihai* is introduced on the fourth beat of measure 18 and concludes with the quarter note in measure 22, after which we get the second and third statements of the same motive. The *tihai* is commonly found in North Indian classical music and often structures a melodic motive in such a way that it seems to contradict the implied meter and thus creates tension; this tension is resolved when the melodic motive cadences on the *sam*, as shown below on the first beat of measure 27.

![Figure 1.1 Transcription of Raga Tilanga](image-url)

In measure 27, the main melody (*gat*) is introduced with a sixteen beat cycle accompaniment, *tintal*. (Each beat in the *tala* is represented by a quarter note in measures 27 onward.) Beginning in measure 27, the first beat of each measure is accented by a variety of very low-pitched gongs, some of which correspond
with the tuning used by the other instruments, some of which do not. Instead of using a single large low-pitched gong as most other gamelan ensembles do, Shankar appears to have used at least four different gongs, each with different pitches. While there are many different types of gamelan ensembles in Bali and Java, in Bali, most gamelan use fewer gongs—most often two gongs with slightly different pitches. (In Java, there are many gamelan with six or more large and small gongs.) A photograph of Shankar’s instrumental collection reveals at least two larger gongs, as well as two smaller gongs (kempul).¹⁰⁴

The new texture that ensues superficially evokes the soft style Javanese gamelan, which features the suling (wooden flute) and the rebab (spiked fiddle)—most likely with the bansuri (Indian wooden flute), and the sarangi, a stringed instrument. As the piece progresses, the melody gradually reincorporates some animated motives from the introduction into its melody. At times the melodic instruments separate into different layers of melodic and rhythmic articulation, each with respective subdivisions of the beat; these interlocking layers suggest the hierarchical vertical organization of the Javanese gamelan, but it should be noted that the instruments are used in an idiosyncratic way that seems more motivated by tonal color than the recreation of Javanese music. This resulting effect of contrapuntal stratification among Indian melodic instrument rarely appears in Indian classical music. Melodic instruments do often conflict rhythmically with accompanying rhythmic instruments; yet these melodic instruments usually either play together in unison (with slight ornamentation,) pass the melody from one instrument to another in a call and response pattern, or both.

¹⁰⁴ See Plate XXII in Abrahams, ”The Life and Art of Uday Shankar”, Plate XXII, 166.
Raga Tilanga's melodic material also bears witness to Shankar’s experimentation. As its title would suggest, the North Indian raga Tilang governs the pitch organization of the piece, as shown in Figure 1.2:

![Tilang transcription](image)

**Figure 1.2 Transcription of Raga Tilang**

The melody, drawing on seven principal tones: D-F#-G-A-C#-D, closely corresponds to the melodic contour of the raga cited above. This six-note scale corresponds closely to the seven-note Javanese scale, pelog, used most commonly in the West Java—and at times in Bali, as well. Thus the evocation of the gamelan arises from the pitch material, the gong’s inclusion, and the resulting texture, the last of which alludes to the different layers of organization associated with the gamelan. Raga Tilanga thus integrates both an “Indian” and Javanese approach to melody in terms of its melodic structure, while at the same time, its texture evokes mostly the Javanese gamelan through the prominent addition of gongs, integrated with mostly Indian instruments.

*Danse Kartikeyya’s* dense rhythmic and timbral textures also subtly evoke the Balinese gamelan through their occasional layering of rapid, interlocking ornamental figures and its progressive shift towards a more animated tempo. The song notably features several instruments that do not appear in North Indian classical instrumentation: the South Indian *mridungam*

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105 Bor et al., *The Raga Guide: A Survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas*. 

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drum, and the folk percussion instrument *Jala Taranga* (literally translated as “water-vibration,”) which is described as “water-filled porcelain pots” in the liner notes. The song also includes unspecified gong instruments, presumably Southeast Asian in origin, as well as the *Shankh*, a conch shell traditionally sounded in religious ceremonies, and the so-called “*Zhanzha,*” which most likely refers to the *jhajhari,* a Bengali folk instrument consisting of “two hollow brass rings, containing small copper balls.”

Danse Kartikeyya’s melody corresponds to the North Indian raga *Malkauns,* a pentatonic scale, as shown in Figure 1.3.

![Figure 1.3 Transcription of Raga Malkauns](image)

Halfway through the piece, brilliant, rapid elaborations ornament the central melody, played by gongs in the highest pitch register. The ornamentation’s sixteenth-note subdivisions of the main melody, presumably played by a xylophone, interlock with the main melody, and thus evoke similar gestures by the pot-gong set in the Balinese gamelan, the *reyong.* Cymbals mark significant events in Danse Kartikeyya, such as major cadences; this practice is also associated with Balinese gamelan, which includes two

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small double sets of cymbals (rinchik or ceng-ceng) that sound a clash or “ceng.”109

The Balinese tinge to this piece thus manifests itself in the unconventional instrumentation, and in the performance techniques idiomatic to those uncommonly used instruments. After the gong opens the piece in the first measure, Danse Kartikeyya’s melody is played by unison “Jala Taranga” or “gongs,” the flute, and sarod and sarangi, as shown in Figure 1.4:

![Musical notation](image)

**Figure 1.4 Transcription of Danse Kartikeyya, opening**

As the texture thickens, the gongs introduce interlocking elaboration and flourishes; the cymbals also enter, as does the Shankh. This Balinese tinge also appears in the piece Danse Snanum. Danse Snanum opens with a shimmering, rapid elaboration played on the Jala-Taranga, gongs, or both; this elaboration ornaments the main melody in a way that again evokes the

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109 Ibid.
Balinese gamelan. *Danse Snanum* then proceeds to alternate between a more traditional North Indian classical treatment, and the virtuosic, rapid flourishes and unison texture in the flute, strings, and *Jala-Taranga* that suggest the gamelan.

The remaining pieces, *Raga Bahar, Danse Gandharva, Danse Ramachandra, Danse Indra, Bhajana,* and *Raga Mishra-Kaphi,* conform more to recognizably North and South Indian classical influences. However, as previously mentioned, they only feature the most basic outline of the melodic ragas and fail in their briefness to follow through with the large-scale organization associated with Indian classical genres. The juxtaposition of non-traditional pieces alongside more traditionally orchestrated pieces suggests Shankar’s intention to alternate the more dramatic, spectacular pieces, and those that were perhaps were more understated. This recording captures his foray into a newly defined genre of music that integrated musical elements from North Indian and South Indian classical forms, Indian folk forms, as well as traditions associated with Southeast Asian traditional and classical forms.110 His music, as a result, could not represent any previously defined classical

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110 Shankar’s interest in Southeast Asian traditions suggests follows to some extent a precedent set by Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore’s own explorations of a “single unified entity of Asian art, combining the three ancient civilizations of India, China, and Japan.” That concept was most famously articulated by Japanese scholar Kakuzo Okakura in his book *The Ideals of the East* (1903), which inspired the Tagores and others in their “nationalist art circle.” Tapati Guha-Thakurta identifies this text as indicative of a “new Orientalism—an Orientalism that was in search not merely of antiquity and a lost civilization in the East but of a living wave of spirituality that could resist the colonization of the West.” In his book, Okakura tracks the spread of Indian Buddhism in China and Japan; in her introduction to the book, the Anglo-Irish Hindu disciple Sister Nivedita claimed that the book implied the spread of Hinduism and the “essence of Indian civilization” across these cultures. Guha-Thakurta, “Recovering the Nation’s Art,” 84. In the same vein, Shankar’s interest in Southeast Asia may have at least partly stemmed from his recognition of the transmission of Hindu influences. An alternate perspective would consider Shankar’s interest in Southeast Asian traditions as foreshadowing the future alliances forged between the newly decolonized nations of Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, as well as China at the historic Asian-African Conference at Bandung in 1955, and the subsequent establishment of the Nonaligned Movement in 1961 against colonialism. See Sunil S. Amrith, “Asian Internationalism: Bandung’s Echo in a Colonial Metropolis,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 4 (2005).
tradition. As a self-proclaimed innovator, he of course never intended to reproduce any previously defined tradition blindly, but to integrate the strongest elements from distinct traditions and thus form a new art.

Conclusion: Defining the Modern Indian Artist

Gerry Farrell has written that Uday Shankar decided to present Indian culture in the form of dramatic, short episodes full of special effects in an effort to conform to the tastes of Western audiences accustomed to the grand world exhibitions of the 19th century. He writes:

It was to be expected... that Indian music and dance in the concert-hall would, to an extent, follow the format of an exhibition... That Uday Shankar’s shows also took this format is evidence of the way in which Indian artists, despite their original intentions, had to adapt in order to promote their culture in the West.\footnote{Farrell, Indian Music and the West, 166.}

Farrell rightly points to Western audience’s Orientalist expectations as a significant influence on Shankar’s career. But he claims that Shankar was forced to adapt his “original intentions,” which denies the possibility of Shankar’s proactive incorporation of Orientalist discourse for his own use. (Farrell presumably considers these “original intentions” to be what Shankar would have done if he had performed for an Indian audience in India, which discounts the fact that Shankar’s career was launched abroad.) If one considers Shankar’s contributions solely within the context of his attempts to reproduce the pseudo-realistic displays associated with the colonial exhibitions, one denies the extent of his imagination and ingenuity, already documented by his early performance of the “Dance of Shiva” at the British Empire Exhibition at
Wembley in 1899. Shankar’s performances for the most part did not embrace the colonial exhibition’s goal to project a “realistic” display; rather they expressed Shankar’s desire to project artistic and cultural progress. In limiting Shankar to an imitative context, Farrell overlooks Shankar’s numerous efforts to define himself as an emerging modern Indian artist and subject, within the context of the Westernized elite in India.

The early nationalist period in India was characterized by competitive attempts to appropriate and redefine cultural elements; some of these attempts served British imperialism, others served anti-colonial rhetoric, but many of them served both, as did Shankar’s early performances. His collaborations with Pavlova and performances in the Wembley and Paris Exhibitions testify to his explicit participation in the propagation of colonial images of Indians; as Timothy Mitchell as shown, these exhibitions were crucial demonstrations of imperial power.\(^1\)\(^2\) However, as a non-Western artist performing of his own volition within the West, Shankar complicates his participation in an imperial project. He undeniably participated in the Orientalist discourse, but Shankar’s participation in Orientalist discourse exceeded the service of British imperialism. He appropriated this discourse within his vision of modern Indian cultural identity, and his own role as the “modern Indian artist.”\(^1\)\(^3\)

\(^{1,2}\) Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity.”

\(^{1,3}\) As noted earlier, Shankar’s conception of the modern Indian artist deeply resonated with Abanindranath’s own conception of the artist, and of himself: “Aesthetic sensibility, intense thought and emotion, a discerning taste, ... singleminded dedication, self-control, a deep attachment to one’s country, and skills in drawing and painting—only through such an aggregation of numerous qualities is an artist made.” (Cited in Guha-Thakurta, “Recovering the Nation’s Art,” 88.) Guha-Thakurta’s own gloss on Abanindranath’s views situates him as the earlier and more successful analogue of Uday Shankar, within the world of visual art: “Abanindranath reserved for himself this hallowed status of an artist—a status that automatically endowed him with exclusive access to Indian art and exclusive powers to propagate its cause.” Guha-Thakurta, “Recovering the Nation's Art,” 88.
The degree to which Shankar was able to realize his vision was admittedly limited. At the beginning of this chapter, I allude to this fact, which is confirmed by the failure of his dance school and other evidence. While the Tagores and other significant cultural leaders (including Nehru, who allocated a public land-grant to help found the school), endorsed his vision, his reception in India was mixed. During his first trip to India, for instance, Ravi Shankar reported that Uday’s critical success in Europe afforded him in India “enormous crowds of admirers.” Mohan Khokar reports, however, that his four performances in Calcutta “scarcely generated any excitement.” That Shankar exhausted the sources of his financial support and had to leave India and return to Paris lends Khokar’s account greater credence. This insufficient support for his work, (financial and otherwise), alongside anecdotes detailing his encounters with Indians who took him for a foreign curiosity, suggest that he achieved nowhere near the level of success in India that he had enjoyed in Europe and the United States. Even if one were to acknowledge that Uday Shankar had indeed captured the spirit of India, the vast majority of India—outside the small Westernized Indian elite—had little interest in his work.

114 Abrahams, "The Life and Art of Uday Shankar", 102. Shankar’s lukewarm reception in India evokes the later reception of Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray’s films in India. While Shankar and Ray’s incorporation of Western aesthetics into their work may provoke speculation that Indian audiences objected to their integration of Western modernist aesthetics, this connection may not be sustainable. Poonam Arora notes that the reasons behind Satyajit Ray’s relative obscurity in India remain unexplored (as in the case of Uday Shankar), and she implies that the cause is most biographers’ attempts to defend Ray against his critics. Arora throws out some intriguing possibilities as to why he has been largely shunned within India outside the Bengali middle class, including Ray’s possible intention to distance himself from “trenchantly” Marxist politics in West Bengal. She also notes that his contemporary, filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, is praised within Indian film circles for his radical experimentation, and Ghatak’s implicit comparison with Ray with contribute to Ray’s obscurity. Poonam Arora, "Annual Film Quarterly Film Book Survey, Part II: The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity, by Darius Cooper," Caliber - Film Quarterly 55, no. 1 (2001): 55.
115 Khokar, His Dance, His Life, 53.
Shankar’s most vocal detractors, namely academic historians, considered Indian identity and music as frozen at an ancient time, immune to the actual time of the unfolding nation-state in the modern age.\(^\text{116}\) However, Shankar’s work precisely problematized these neat separations between modernity and tradition, and between India and the West; these separations, of course, conjoined Europe with modernity, and India with tradition. Taking account of the state of things around him, Shankar observed how the “traditionalists,” carrying on the work of British Orientalist scholars, focused on identifying specific sources for respective traditions to guarantee their authenticity.\(^\text{117}\) However, the specificity of these sources served to articulate differences in language, religion, class, and economics. These differences, in turn, threatened the integrity of the Indian nation, which had, remarkably, united a seemingly infinite variety of distinct cultures for the first time in a single identity.

As an artist, Shankar was particularly conscious of music and dance’s dangerous potential to reify those terms of difference. Shankar’s insistence on incorporating and integrating the indigenous folk, classical, and traditional dances resisted those terms. That resistance also extended to his music, as the recording documents. His music mixed distinct traditions, and in doing so, diluted specific identities in a sacrifice intended to unify the diverse communities of the new Indian nation.

Shankar’s attempts of course largely failed to come to fruition. Shankar’s relative obscurity in the present-day accounts of Indian music

\(^\text{116}\) It should be noted that many academics’ wishes to \textit{preserve} traditions without change goes against these traditions’ actual practice by dancers and musicians, almost all of who value the importance of innovation in the performance of “traditional” idioms.

\(^\text{117}\) Shankar viewed the preservation of specific traditions irrelevant to a modern nation; he believed that the true artist should not express himself in terms of specific traditions but instead should define his or her own, as described on p. 44.
history results most directly from his failure to satisfy the gatekeepers of official Indian culture at the state-run Sangeet Natak Akademi. The Akademi was the most significant form of government patronage of the arts; founded in 1953, the Sangeet Natak Akademi’s objective was reviving and promoting traditional forms of dance, drama, music and film.\textsuperscript{118} Shankar’s exclusion from the Akademi led to his exclusion from the official narrative of Indian culture; his departure from recognized traditions was considered antithetical to the promotion of Indian traditional arts, which the Sangeet Natak Akademi defined as the essence of Indian cultural identity.

Having spent nearly a third of his life abroad, Shankar, unlike those who had been brought up in India, never had the luxury to proclaim his authenticity through decades of allegiance to a single guru. Instead he recognized the environment around him—in this case Europe and the United States—as inspiration. Having had little to no formal training in dance or music, he lacked the cultural authority to market himself as a master of any recognized traditions. Nevertheless, he realized that his perceived ethnic authority could not be challenged if he defined himself as a modern Indian artist—for there were no templates that he needed to conform to. While Shankar may be in this sense be considered an opportunist, over the course of his career, he increasingly identified with the identity that he had constructed for himself as the modern Indian artist. He was thus sincere in his efforts to serve the nation as such a figure—and to be recognized officially for his role.

Shankar’s performances in Europe and the United States, alongside his struggle to insert himself into a shifting national definition of culture, granted him an acute understanding of the constructedness of “Indianness.”

Orientalist education had from the start revealed to him that the markers associated with Indian identity had no essential location. With this knowledge, he wholeheartedly participated in using these markers of “Indianness” to serve his own ends—and what he believed to be the good of the new Indian nation. Shankar’s questioning of India’s heritage and his intention to modernize Indian culture were not unique. Many Indian elites who were active in India’s nationalist politics—including Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru—had also spent significant time abroad and, in many cases, received their education there. Their physical and cultural separation from India while abroad enabled them to gain a perspective on the events unfolding within India from a helpful distance. As noted earlier, Nehru and Shankar shared common views on the role of science and progress in India, but they also shared a concern that the distinctive identity of Indian culture should remain intact. As expressed below, Nehru’s words could perhaps have just as well come from Shankar himself:

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. To some extent I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts rose within me. Did I know India?—I who presumed to scrap much of her past heritage? There was a great deal that had to be scrapped, that must be scrapped; but surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was, and could not have been continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring, something that was worthwhile. What was this something?\footnote{Nehru, The Discovery of India, 34.}

Shankar’s distance from India and focus on modernizing India’s traditions firmly situate him in the milieu of early nationalist politics in India. Yet his
producing and performing an altogether new form of Indian culture abroad also links him to later generations of South Asian diasporic musicians.

Shankar’s career prepared a path for future South Asian artists in the West, most notably, his younger brother Ravi Shankar, who has in the last century defined Indian music and culture for many people outside India. Ravi Shankar himself has commented on how Uday Shankar influenced him:

I always had a dream to bring our (Indian) music to the West and to make Westerners appreciate it, and to put it in a respectful position. That is how I started my mission in 1956. I was lucky to have had my musical training from Baba Allauddin (Ustad Allauddin Khan) before I started my mission, but actually my whole urge and inspiration was from my brother Uday Shankar. He was the true pioneer who brought music and dance to the west [emphases added].\(^{120}\)

Uday Shankar was, however, by no means the first South Asian musical performer who gave extensive concerts abroad; many Indian musicians, mostly unnamed, had performed at the numerous colonial exhibitions and expositions that took place during the 19\(^{th}\) century and early 20\(^{th}\) century in the United States and Europe. These musicians’ live performances—and their presence as live specimens of Indian culture at these venues—often served to lend a patina of realism to the environment that had been so painfully reconstructed around them.\(^{121}\)

One of the more celebrated Indian musicians who gave concerts in the West was Hazrat Inayat Khan, a performer on the vina and sitar as well as a vocalist. Khan appeared in concerts with his family as “The Royal Musicians of Hindustan” in 1910 in New York; he had grown up in a family of Sufi

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\(^{120}\) Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), forward.

\(^{121}\) For descriptions of similar scenes elsewhere, see Armstrong, "A Jumble of Foreignness.", Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 1-5.
musicians and received classical training. As Gerry Farrell notes, Khan “comes over as a conservative in his writings, seeking to control the spread of classical music within strict boundaries of taste and education.” Shankar, in contrast, was committed to producing a new form of Indian music and art that was relevant to the modern age.

Shankar’s geographical separation from official national traditions directly contributed to his departure from established customs by enabling, first, his ignorance of these customs’ existence, and second, his freedom to disregard them even as he grew more familiar with them. Audiences in the West who were unfamiliar with these customs, official definitions of “tradition,” and a rigid conception of Indian identity were less critical of Shankar’s decisions to depart from previous practice and thus provided a conducive environment for his artistic development.

As a pioneer who consciously defined a new national culture outside India, Uday Shankar figures as an archetype of the modern South Asian fusion musician today—particularly those in the diaspora. Shankar’s role as an archetype for more recent diasporic musicians is perhaps most clearly established by the fact that he represents one of the first diasporic musicians to define his identity as a “bridge” to Asia, that is, as a cultural interpreter.

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122 Farrell, *Indian Music and the West*, 147-55. Farrell also recognizes Rabindranath Tagore as an early Indian musician who traveled in the West. It must be noted, however, that while Tagore was a composer and musician and did indeed spend time in the West, he did not for the most time spend time in the West as a musician. Tagore wrote many songs to accompany his poems; they constitute a genre called *Rabindrasangeet*, performed then and now mostly within present-day Bengal, that is, the Indian state, West Bengal, and the nation of Bangladesh. See Sukumar Ray, *Music of Eastern India: Vocal Music in Bengali, Oriya, Assamese and Manipuri with Special Emphasis on Bengali* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1973), 189-220. While a few Western transcriptions of these songs were published abroad, they were not very popular among foreign audiences. Tagore’s appearances abroad instead focused on his contributions to literature and philosophy (including musical aesthetics, as Farrell notes). Farrell, *Indian Music and the West*, 157-62.

between Asia and the West. Outside of India, Uday Shankar’s performances provided an accessible gateway to appreciating Indian cultural traditions, and his exposure therein helped characterize him as an unofficial ambassador of Indian culture. Yet as Arif Dirlik notes, what would appear to be a position of privilege and advantage more often proved a liability:

[T]he condition for successful service as bridges between culture was marginality; it was their status as ‘marginal men’ who exited between two societies without belonging fully to either that enabled the status of cultural interpreter.124

Shankar’s performances in the West distinguished him as an Indian in the West, but in doing so, ultimately excluded his participation in determining official definitions of Indian culture.

Shankar’s geographic distance from India and his marginality from Indian and Western culture emerge once again as a key issue in considering the careers of contemporary South Asian diasporic artists and musicians, whom I consider in later chapters. Unbound by tradition, these artists experiment with new digital technologies and hybridized styles that hark back to Shankar’s experiments with different forms of music and production technologies as well as to his incorporation of musical influences from other cultures. These musicians also share with Shankar a conflicted relationship to national identity because of their diasporic status, and the type of music they choose to make.

Most importantly, the history of Shankar’s performances in the West and India introduces the fundamental questions as to how one defines modernity outside the West, and to what extent a non-Western culture’s

engagement with modernity compromises that culture’s distinctive cultural identity. Shankar’s efforts to bring Indian cultural forms within the realm of modernity frequently clashed against official definitions of Indian culture. These official definitions denied the possibility of Indian culture’s changing over time and its engagement with the outside world, for acknowledging these possibilities would annihilate the common notion of Indian identity as a fixed, unchanging essence. Shankar, in contrast, viewed Indian culture and its traditions as the product of dynamic processes. As this chapter has detailed, Shankar approached the task of defining a new national culture through a strategy that amalgamated specific, established identities to the extent that their distinctive qualities were undermined, but still recognizable as Indian. Defining the presence of modernity within a South Asian context still constitutes a formidable challenge within both South Asia and its diasporic communities today. While Shankar was part of a first generation of diasporic musicians, he was nevertheless committed to defining the national culture of India. The following chapters will focus on South Asian diasporic musicians living in Britain who struggle to define a different culture, namely that of the South Asian diaspora in Britain.