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# BRIGITTE CHATAIGNIER

## India, Dance and My Life

### Before India, Paris

From the age of six, I learnt ballet and performed annually at the Salle Pleyel. Later, I took classes with Nina Vyroubova and Solange Golovine. In 1978, aged 17, I joined the *Académie Internationale de la Danse* and studied Mime at the *École du Carré Sylvia Montfort*. I trained under various teachers like Carlson, Smith, Wolliaston, Buirge, and Yano. At this moment of my life I started experimenting with choreography. I worked with Ismaël Smouni on posture, breath, and rhythm. From 1980, I studied contemporary dance with Muriel Jaër for three years. Since I was attracted to Eastern dance-theatres I learnt Ceylonese dances and attended two workshops with Grotowski's Théâtre Laboratoire. In the meanwhile, in 1982 my meeting with Kiran Vyas opened the doors of India to me.

Michel Lestréhan, who was studying Kathakali in Kerala, spoke about Mohiniattam to me—a gentle, *lasya*-style dance. Its calm, supple, gentle grace inspired me to travel to India to explore and draw from its traditions for my contemporary work. I studied the basics of Bharatanatyam with Savitry Nair and choreographed a hybrid mini-solo in a sari. Before leaving, I took a few Feldenkrais method classes with Myriam Pfeffer, who encouraged me, saying, “Go to India, learn all you can—there will still be time when you return.”

In September 1987, I arrived in India and joined Kerala Kalamandalam in Cheruthuruthy, studying under Kalamandalam Leelamma, who inspired respect and admiration. She taught Mohiniattam in a kalari open to nature. The tempo was slow, requiring me to undo, reassemble, and reform everything I had learnt.

Gradually, I mastered the *adavus*—with their refined, curving, undulating movements, facial expressions and *mudras*. The Hindu deities, Ganesh or Vishnu, appeared to me through my gestures in the form of representations and stories. Afternoons were spent observing rehearsals with Kalamandalam Sathyabhama, the school dean and my guru's guru.

### Learning in Kerala, dancing in India

On 26 January 1988, I performed my *arangetram* in the Koothambalam, dressed in traditional attire. That same year, I received an ICCR scholarship and continued training under my guru Leelamma. Decades later, I still dance the same cherished repertoire. Her guidance shaped me deeply, I realize how lucky I was to have benefited from her presence. From our first meeting until she left us too soon, our *guru-shishya* relationship was carefully preserved.

In Cheruthuruthy, I danced at the temple of the goddess Bhagavathi. At about that time Djeya, our daughter, was born in Thrissur in 1989. The light rain of the monsoon, the rice paddy environment, the white-clad inhabitants, the time punctuated by spectacular rituals and temple festivals: I knew I was living a unique moment, the serenity of Kerala is unheard of elsewhere.

In 1990, I met Padma Shri awardee Kalamandalam Kshemavathy in Thrissur. As soon as I caught sight of her with her dense hair, her presence dazzled me. At her request, I performed the Cholkettu, earning her praise for the technique I learned from Leelamma. I later joined her troupe, performing across Kerala. Her creativity and musicality deeply inspired me. Guru Kshemavathy exemplifies that age poses no barrier to dance—it only allows for



continuity. In 1992, I was awarded the French-Indian Cultural Agreement Scholarship from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Krishnamoorthy Soorya invited me for a solo Mohiniattam performance after hearing of my work. Since then, I have performed at various venues and festivals like Nishagandi, Soorya, Neemrana, Chidambaram, Maha Kumbakonam, Sangeet Natak Academy, and the India International Centre and Habitat Centre. My performances have been covered in the press. Kamalini Dutt featured me on Doordarshan's programme for foreign dancers where I gained experience performing before the camera. In 1991, Sharon Lowen invited me to the Third Videshi Kalakar Utsav which brought together foreign artistes, and I returned in 2018 for the Manasa-Art Without Frontiers festival and seminar: 'Looking Back to Move Forward.'

The practice of Carnatic vocal, with gurus like Kalamandalam Ambika, Krishnan Kutty Marar, and Mangat Nadesan, has enabled me to deepen the inseparable link between music and dance. I learnt Nangiar Kouttu's eye and face exercises and danced Kaikutikali with women during festivals. Captivated by its dynamic *tandava* and contrasting characters, I also practised Kathakali female roles and did *Chutty*, delicately tracing intricate lines with lime and rice paste while seated cross-legged.

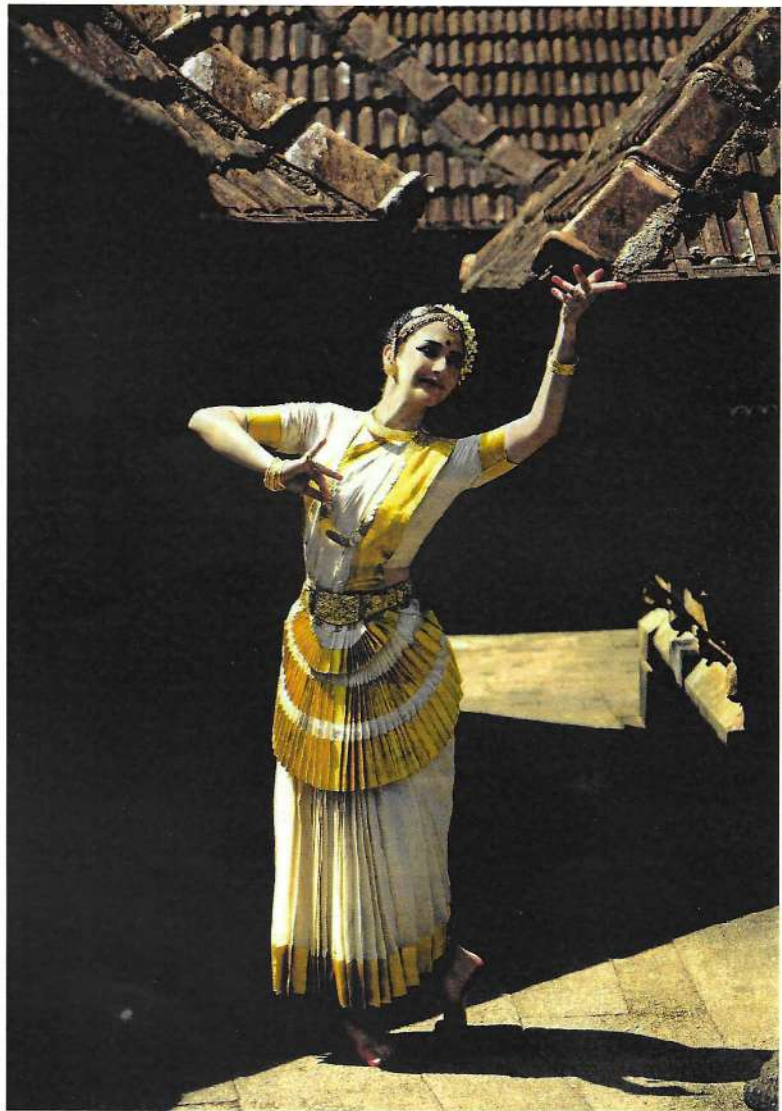
From 1990 to 1993, I lived in Irinjalakuda. Mohiniattam classes with researcher and author Nirmala Paniker broadened my perspectives. Staying true to the Kalamandalam style, the Kalyanikutty Amma style, attracted me too, with its subtle interpretation, history and the beauty

of its *lasya*. I frequently travelled to Ernakulam to learn from her daughter, Sreedevi Rajan, an exceptional guru.

Finally, to comprehend the meaning of the dances I practice, I consult Dr. C.P. Unnikrishnan, who gives me the essential keys to understanding *Natyashastra*. This teaching, received like a slow cascade of information and revelations, continues to amaze and nourish me with its profound links between practice and theory.

### Working in gratitude

1993 marked my return to France. During my six years in India, I returned only twice. Any chance to dance and teach was cherished. Our







son Shankar was born in Paris in 1994, bringing joy to the family.

In 1995, Michel and I co-founded Compagnie Prana in Rennes. Two years later, we moved to Chavakkad, Kerala for a year. From dawn we trained in Kalaripayattu—sharp eyes, leg throws, dynamic twists—deepening my connection to physical energy. I continued to visit my dance gurus, and after a few months, the family settled in Cheruthuruthy. There, I continued my research, developing artistic residencies and transmissions.

Thanks to our continued dedication to creation, sharing and transmission, Prana receives institutional support and valuable assistance from the Indian Embassy. We organized numerous Mohiniattam and Kathakali tours, inviting renowned gurus and musicians. I am deeply grateful to the inspiring individuals who

have supported my journey as a dancer between India and France: Milena Salvini, director of Centre Mandapa, Francis Wacziarg founder of Neemrana Hotels and the Neemrana Music Foundation, and Thomas Erdos of *Théâtre de la Ville*. I am also thankful to the many venues that have hosted me, including Centre Mandapa, *Théâtre des Abbesses*, *Centre National de la Danse*, *La Villette*, *Musée Guimet*, *Scène Nationale de Saint-Nazaire*,

Keep a link, keep going and give back. That is how I live. I paid tribute to my gurus Leelamma and Kshemavathy, inviting them to tour France between 1999 and 2012, in collaboration with ARTA, the *Maison des Cultures du Monde*, the *Musée Guimet* and others. I also had the honour of welcoming dancer Bharati Shivaji.

#### **Film, research, teaching**

Upon returning to France, inspired by a poetic



memory, I began a film project and started writing. Celebrated Kerala filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan agreed to collaborate, and we secured CNC funding. 'The Dance of The Enchantress', shot in 35mm at iconic Mohiniattam locations, features my gurus—Kalamandalam Leelamma, Kshemavathy, Sreedevi Rajan—and their disciples. Selected for the 2007 Locarno Festival, it premiered in 2008. My collaboration with Adoor remains one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

In 2012, I worked with the *Maison des Cultures du Monde* to create a CD of dance music entitled *Singing the Mohiniattam*. These projects, enriched by Dominique Vitalyos' translations, contribute to the preservation of our choreographic, musical and poetic heritage.

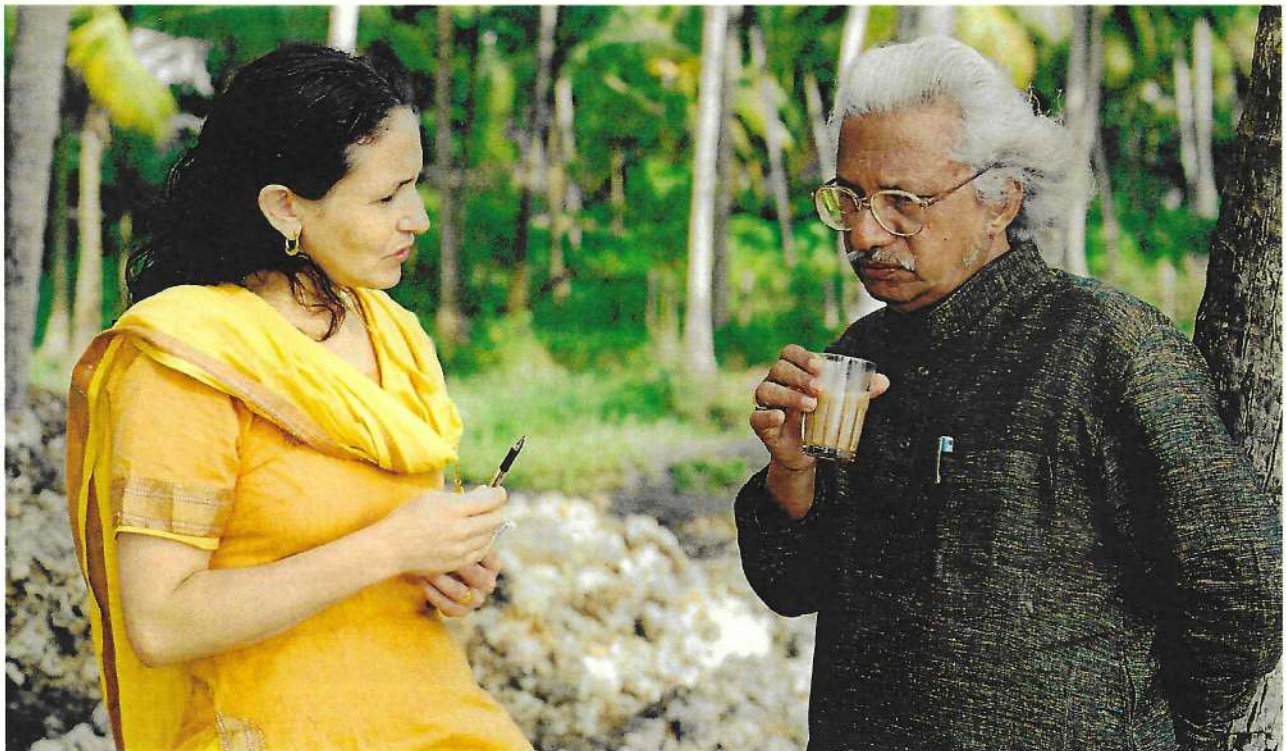
I conducted two exciting research projects supported by the *Centre National de la Danse* for research on dance heritage in 2012 and 2021. The first, in collaboration with Brigitte Prost, professor of history and aesthetics of performing arts, focused on the evolving history

and aesthetics of Mohiniattam. The second, with dance researcher Federica Fratagnoli, explored the somatic dimension of this dance, examining how the performer's experience and life are expressed through narrative form.

My passion for transmitting and sharing what I have learnt in India remains a strong driving force. It is essential for preserving my memory and developing my pedagogy. I regularly give talks in France at universities, schools, and institutions like ARTA and *Université Franche-Comté*. My studio in Rennes also serves as a space for teaching, personal practice, and show preparation.

### Contemporary creations

Creating new works is a parallel journey to my work as a Mohiniattam performer—it demands reflection, composition, and culminates in the production of a live show, the heart of every project. Collaborations between India and France are often challenging, but I have developed a unique approach blending Indian heritage with a contemporary vision. These





creations explore different themes serving as a transformative journey shaped by words, sounds, and gestures that flow from organic movement to theatricality. Since 2000, I have shared a deep artistic connection with poet Zéno Bianu, whose poems inspire each piece.

My creations are the result of a collective work in which dance, text, music, set design and lighting come together. I create and perform works inspired by Indian culture, either solo or with artistes connected to India. Each piece features original music. '*La Chambre des Vertiges*' explores a woman's letters to her beloved; *Gopika* draws from Indian mythology; *Ganga* blends themes of water, river goddess and femininity; *Bhopal Blue*, with Djeya Lestréhan, confronts exorcism and industrial catastrophe and reconstruction of the inhabitants. In 2019, I created '*Un Tracé*' with Catherine Legrand, a duet reflecting the Orient in the work of Dominique Bagouet and the movement of Indian dance.

I danced for choreographers like the *Païses* trio with Elisabeth Petit in 1996, while also participating in artistic transmission with Régine

Chopinot, Loïc Touzé, and Boris Charmatz. In 2004, I choreographed and danced Léo Delibes' opera *Lakmé* for the *Opéra de Rennes*, later revived in Reims and adapted for Metz.

I presented my own creations at *the Triangle* and the *Champs Libres* in Rennes, at the *Maison de la Poésie* and the *Théâtre du Soleil* in Paris, at the *Grand Théâtre de Lorient*, at the *Théâtre de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines*, and for the *Bonjour India* and *Namaste France* festivals.

My project *Mala* is touring in India from 2025. It is a woman's inner journey, transcending the boundaries of the contemporary and the traditional, crossing worlds from East to West. In 2023, I received the Bharat Mitra Samman-Distinguished Alumni Award from the ICCR.

For over thirty years, my life between India and France has profoundly influenced my perception of dance and art. I dedicate time to practicing Yoga and Feldenkrais® method, enhancing awareness through movement. Mohniattam is as essential for me as ever. If I dance a *padam*, it is for sharing it. Performing acts as a momentum where dance, music and poetry merges in a lyrical offering.

