



# BHARATANATYAM AS A TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSLOCAL CONNECTION

A Study of Selected Indian and American Texts

## INTRODUCTION

In India, Bharatanatyam is the most popular classical dance form and has a great impact not only in the field of dance but also on other art forms like sculpture and painting, which all influence one another. According to Kapila Vatsyayan, “The theory of Indian dancing cannot be understood in isolation and has to be comprehended as a complex synthesis of the arts of literature, sculpture and music (1967: 229). Members of the Indian-American diaspora practice Bharatanatyam in an attempt to preserve their culture and also as an assertion of their cultural identity. Dance is an art form that relates to sequences of body movements that are both aesthetic and symbolic and rooted in particular cultures. It often tells a story and different cultures maintain different norms and standards by which dances should be performed as well as by whom and on what occasions. Dance influences and is influenced by interaction with different cultures. Priya Srinivasan’s *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* is a particularly valuable resource within the extensive body of research on Bharatanatyam that critically examines Indian dance forms, tracing the history of dance as well as the lived experience of dancers across time, class, gender and culture. Taking dance as a metaphor of personal and cultural expression, these texts and personal interviews of Bharatanatyam dancers in India and the US will be discussed in this paper. The interviews

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of Indian dancers Anita Ratnam and Priyadarshini Govind, who perform in India as well as the US and other countries, have been used as texts for analysis. The dancers in the US whose interviews will be studied are Kamala Lakshman and Tara Catherine Pandeya. With the help of these texts and interviews, I intend to explore larger issues of gender, identity, culture, race, region, nation and power dynamics inherent in the practice of Bharatanatyam and how these practices influence and are, in turn, influenced by transnational and translocal connections.

The focus here will be on how cultural movements and political processes have influenced Bharatanatyam as it is practiced in India and the US. My aim is to show how the connections with these processes and cultural elements in or from America have helped in creating local, regional and national cultural traditions in its home country.

#### BHARATANATYAM

Bharatanatyam is an ancient dance form said to be based on the *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Indian text of performing arts, compiled around 200 BCE by the sage Bharata. According to the *Natya Shastra*, dance and the performing arts are an expression of spiritual ideas, the message in the scriptures, and human virtues. The *Shastra* also lays down the theories of how to express these messages through *rasa* (aesthetics that evoke emotion), *bhava* (emotion or mood conveyed), expression, gestures, acting techniques, basic steps, and standing postures, all of which are part of Indian classical dances. As explained by Kapila Vatsyayan, the different components of the theory and practice of dramatic composition (*natya*) are modes of presentation (*dharmis*), styles (*vrttis*) and types of enacting (*abhinaya*). Further, *abhinaya* consists of *angika* (body gestures), *vacika* (the verbal--recitation and music), *aharya* (costumes and make up) and *sattvika* (of the temperaments and involuntary states) (1967: 230–31). Based on the *Natya Shastra*, The Sangeet Natak Academy—the national level academy for performing arts set up by the Government of India—recognises eight Indian classical dance forms, namely, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam. These different dance forms belong to different regions and have

music and oral compositions either in the local language or in Sanskrit. Despite the diversity of styles in the costumes, expressions and movements, these dance forms are representative of a commonality of basic ideas. Bharatanatyam is one of the earliest major classical dance forms of India. Originating in Southern India, it is a dance traditionally performed by a woman with the accompaniment of a team of singers and musicians. One can find historical and cultural references to dancers and dance elements related to Bharatanatyam over the centuries in scriptures, temple carvings and sculptures.

Indian classical dance forms have undergone dramatic socio-cultural shifts. Kathak, for example, “has been reinvented many times as it travelled from the courts to the kothas, then to the national academies and, finally, to the global market” (Chakaravorty 2008: 171). Today’s Bharatanatyam, once a form of temple dance, originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu (Tamil epics mention the dance form as early as the second century CE) and became popular in South India reflecting Hindu religious themes and spiritual ideas. The most accepted view is that it evolved under royal patronage and was performed by *devadasis*, temple dancers whose name literally means “servants of the Gods.” Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, British colonizers considered it to be a dance of prostitutes and it was finally banned in temples in 1910 under the pretext of social reform. It slowly started to lose its place in the Indian dance arena due to a lack of economic support and the social stigma attached to it.

Similarly, in *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*, anthropologist and dancer Pallabi Chakravorty explains that Kathak originated with dancers called “tawaifs, baijis and the nautch” “in the Mughal and Hindu courts of Lucknow and Benares in Uttar Pradesh, Jaipur in Rajasthan, and Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh,” and that these locations now exemplify the *gharana* tradition of Kathak (2008: 26). These dancers were mostly female and were courtesans. Chakravorty explains that tracing this history “is a significant departure from the standard top-down approach in Kathak scholarship which has tended to focus on famous men and their lineages” (2008: 15). While courtesans have often been considered prostitutes, Chakravorty

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explains that they were considered artists and experts in protocol and were part of the great art scene that flourished in the region of Bengal during the nineteenth century, particularly in the city of Calcutta. She explains that as a result of British occupation, many British families and locals who worked with them became rich and created a new class structure in the region. Citing author Sutarna Banerjee, Chakravorty writes:

In the evolving cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Calcutta, the new Bengali elite and their British rulers formed alliances, collaborating in their accumulation of wealth, power and prestige. The newly rich Bengali Hindus imitated the cultural norms of the Mughal aristocracy in their displays of status and wealth. (2008: 28)

The courtesans of the Mughal courts, then, became known as *nautch* girls, who were entertainers that enlivened the celebrations, religious and otherwise, for the emerging richer sectors of the region. One important element in the transformation of these courtesan artists into entertainers was that in the past they owned lands inherited through their maternal ancestry, and during British occupation they were stripped of their access to their former lands. The courtesans became destitute and many of them did resort to prostitution as one of the few avenues left available to them in supporting themselves and their families. The other possible avenue, which brought some to the national stage and to Bollywood, was dancing; some became famous through their art, but were not considered 'good women' for a very long time (Chakravorty 2008). This is one of the themes of the highly acclaimed novel, *The Guide*, by R.K. Narayan, which depicts dance as a disreputable pursuit and the husband of the protagonist, Rosie, remarks that it is practiced by prostitutes.

There was a movement for the revival of ancient dance forms in the twentieth century anti-colonial and freedom movements that helped to re-establish dance as a mainstream, traditional dance form. Viewed as a representation of Indian culture which was banned by the British, Bharatanatyam rapidly expanded after India gained freedom from British rule in 1947. A lot of credit for reinventing and bringing back Bharatnatyam to the mainstream

goes to Rukmini Devi Arundale, who gave it new life. Citing Avanthi Meduri and S. Sarada, Srinivasan explains:

By the early 1930s, dance in India underwent a transformation, particularly with the work of a Brahmin woman, Rukmini Devi. Married to theosophist George Arundale, she was very much a part of the Theosophical Society in India.

*Sadir* had been practiced in South India by *devadasis*, or women married to a temple deity. The practice had come into ill repute, and it was Rukmini who was credited with rescuing the art by restaging it from the temple to the theater [...]. Far from simply mimicking *sadir*, Rukmini completely transformed it into a modern form. (2012: 109–10)

Bala Saraswati, known as the queen of Bharatnatyam, was also instrumental in popularizing Bharatnatyam, particularly in the US in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s before the advent of the large influx of Indian migrants to the US in the 1980s which altered the dance scene in the US considerably (Srinivasan 2012: 113). It is now the most popular classical Indian dance style in India and also enjoys a high degree of support among diasporic Indian communities. In recent times Bharatanatyam has undergone various innovations and is performed on themes which may not be religious and the movements too may be a fusion of the traditional and the modern.

Over time, advances in technology and communication led to the advent of a globalized world with transnational exchanges in the fields of culture, politics and the economy. Transnational migration and transnational influences became areas of study and interest in all subject areas. The more recent concept of translocality is related to transnationalism. In migration studies, the concept of translocality is a complicated matter, a concept not easy to define. As the name suggests, it is a concept born of transnational and local interactions. Unfortunately, 'translocal' seems to be one of many words that has entered our lexicon without a precise working definition. There are a number of ways that it could be defined. For example, it could mean relationships between distinct cultural areas within a larger society or culture, or it could mean connective or comparative micro studies. For Simon Peth, translocality constitutes a wide range of enduring, open and non-linear processes whose product is the close relationship among different places

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and people, particularly the “interconnectedness and processes that happen in and between different localities” (2014). Explaining the implications of translocality, Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak state that, “translocality is used to describe socio-spatial dynamics and processes of simultaneity and identity formation that transcend boundaries—including, but also extending beyond, those of nation states” (2013: 373). In this paper, I use the term to understand the unique product born of the transnational and very specific local interaction with specific reference to Bharatanatyam and the Indian influence on American Bharatanatyam exponents and their dance and vice versa.

The transnational and translocal impact on the very emergence of Bharatanatyam from the dance form *sadir* through the efforts of two women discussed earlier, namely Rukmini Devi Arundale and Bala Saraswati, needs to be highlighted. They were both widely traveled and were spectators at dances in various countries. Avanthi Meduri writes that, in this context, “the complex imbrication of the global in the local remains an unfulfilled promise in South Asian dance scholarship.” Speaking specifically of Rukmini Devi’s art and scholarship, she writes that it was born of global and local influences “which could not be recuperated within the territorializing intellectual framework of Indian nationalism” (2004: 11). She reiterates that working within her five institutions, Rukmini Devi “developed a pioneering, art and education movement that was both ‘local’ and transnational simultaneously.” According to her, Rukmini Devi often invited international and local artists to her institution as teachers, leading to the development of a unique style of dance and music. Thus “she collaborated with both and developed a multicultural and cosmopolitan world for Bharatanatyam that exceeded standard anthropological definitions of the local and ‘national’ as early as the 1940s” (2004: 14). Kalakshetra, her institution, cannot be defined and understood in narrow geographical terms “because of its historical association with the syncretic, transnational vision of the Theosophical Society.” Meduri proposes that we view Kalakshetra as “a translocal, contemporary arts institution in which Rukmini Devi articulated a transnational history for Bharatanatyam connected to Europe, England, the United States, Canada, Australia, Sri Lanka, Tibet,

Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia simultaneously” (2004: 15–16). These multicultural influences need to be acknowledged as influential in shaping what we now know as Bharatanatyam.

Art and cultural practice are highly complex and dependent upon the individuals who practice them. Individuals traversing the arena of the cultural space leave their mark on it as much as they are impacted by it. With the engagement of different practitioners, the art form and its meanings and perceptions are altered, thus changing the social, gender, economic, and power positions they occupy. In the transnational world, cultural configurations have changed shape faster and more often due to the increased movements of people, technologies and artistic tastes. Here, I explore some of these changes in Bharatanatyam resulting from translocal and transnational exchanges.

#### BHARATANATYAM ACROSS THE CONTINENTS

To trace the history, growth and spread of Bharatanatyam in India and America, an anthropological study by Priya Srinivasan, who is herself a practitioner of Indian classical dance proved to be very informative. Though a diasporic Indian, she reflects upon dance not only through a diasporic lens but also traces the history and growth of dance in India, incorporating a commentary within the comparison on the differences, similarities and influences in both the native country and in America. Her book, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, treats dance, and particularly Indian dance, as a form of hidden labor during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United States. According to Josephine Lee, author of *Performing Asian America* and *The Japan of Pure Invention*, “*Sweating Saris* takes us through the fascinating interconnections of labor, dance, and immigration” (Srinivasan 2012: Cover copy). As Esther Kim Lee writes, “*Sweating Saris* provides a thorough examination of the history of Indian dance in the US with a particular focus on the dancing body and its presence in various locations [...]. [It] exemplifies a new direction in Asian American studies with its dancer-focused interpretation of immigration laws, citizenship, cultural nationalism, orientalism, and contemporary identities” (Srinivasan 2012: Cover copy).

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Through her book, Srinivasan engages with the “larger questions of race, gender, class, and politics and show[s] how the laboring young female body is simultaneously empowered, disciplined, and punished through the training process” (2012: 19). She also explains in great detail the emergence and suspect character of Bharatanatyam during the twentieth century. She explains that when the government banned the custom of offering children as *devadasis* to Indian temples, the husbands and sons of well-known *devadasi* dancers became dance gurus, because many women, and especially middle and upper-class women, wanted to learn the famed dances that today comprise the genre of Bharatanatyam. She says:

Bharata Natyam had gained popularity in India among middle-and [sic] upper-class families by the 1960s and 1970s, and therefore, young women who were often upper-caste Brahmins were trained extensively in the dance form. It must be remembered that the *sadir* form practiced by temple dancers, or *devadasis*, was removed from the *vallavar* community (of which the *devadasis* were members) in part because of the anti-nautch campaign that was part of the larger reforms for women under the nationalist agenda. Since the *sadir* practice became ideologically linked to prostitution by the late nineteenth century, it became impossible for *devadasis* to continue their practice legally. By the 1960s and particularly by the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of young women were carrying out the agenda of the postcolonial nation-state, both in the nation space and in the diaspora. But the gurus for Brahmin women were the men of the *vallavar* caste. (2009: 121)

This not only throws light on the class and caste configurations of the teachers and learners of this dance form but also clearly shows how the gender dynamics were completely reversed in the process. In the practice of *sadir*, the women were teachers, learners and performers but in the case of Bharatanatyam, the men became the gurus (teachers) and the learners and performers were mostly women. This had a major impact on the complex guru-shishya relationship and the Bharatanatyam dance arena came under patriarchal control.

In the early twentieth century, international figures of modern dance, including Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova, took Indian dance into new artistic territory in the United States and elsewhere, making it possible for Indian women to become art dancers in the United States and for Indian dance to be seen as an art form

back in India. Early modern dance in the United States appropriated aspects and techniques from the dance of Indian performers called *nautch* at the beginning of the twentieth century in Britain and the United States, but without the proper acknowledgment of their origins. With the American Immigration Act of 1965 coming into effect, a large number of Asian professionals began to migrate to the US, the migrations peaking in the 1980s. Indian women migrated to the United States as wives and daughters of Indian men and, ineligible for work visas, were unable to take up work in formal sectors of the economy. A suitable option became taking up Indian dance classes in their homes or garages, which became very popular, some eventually leading to the opening of dance academies. With time these women would become established dance gurus, who came to be acknowledged as such in India as well (Srinivasan 2012). Today, many women are recognized as dance gurus, but this is something that was possible only through the circuits of migration, and especially migration of Indian women to the United States.

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It is an obvious fact that cultural practices are altered when people migrate—the migrants are influenced by the host culture and, in turn, exert an influence on the host culture. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find the dance practices of different diasporic groups influencing one another. An interesting example is that of the dance form known as *Shinmuyong*, which in Korean means “new dance.” It is born out of the influence of a German expressionist dance on modern Japanese dance. This dance form was further performed in Korea where dancers picked it up and performed it after adding their own innovations based on traditional Korean dance; “Furthermore, after a world tour in the late 1930s, the *Shinmuyong* dancers actively turned to creating a hybrid Asian dance form in the 1940s, so that *Shinmuyong* became a composite form” (Son 2016). Another meaningful comparison would be that of translocal, transnational exchanges of different Asian migrant groups in the United States. It would also be useful to look at other dance forms worldwide that have been influenced by translocal and transnational forces, but this paper focuses primarily on Bharatanatyam and its trajectories across time and place.

To understand the contemporary attitudes and politics related to traditional Indian dance forms, particularly Bharatanatyam, and the transnational and translocal impacts on it in India and the US, I have taken up interviews of well-known Bharatanatyam dancers and teachers in India and those settled in the US for discussion. The Indian dancers often perform internationally and are familiar with the dance scenes there too.

#### INTERVIEWS OF INDIAN DANCERS

Below, I have included extracts taken from available interviews of two well-known dance advocates relevant to this study.

Anita Ratnam is an Indian classical and contemporary dancer and choreographer. Classically trained in Bharatanatyam, she has also received formal training in Kathakali, Mohiniattam, and T'ai chi and Kalaripayattu, creating a dance style which she calls "Neo Bharat Natyam." She holds a postgraduate diploma in dance from Kalakshetra and has worked in cross-disciplinary theatre productions. Her varied interests are reflected in her associations with television and cinema. Asked about the interesting dance sequences in films that resemble the contemporary shows on stage, she says:

Film dance has become very interesting and more contemporary. I feel that the best modern dancers in India are those that emerge from the filmi genre since they are very flexible and have learned from a cross cultural approach rather than only one style. The choreography has become more international and more vigorous. I really enjoy some of the sequences and wish those dancers were available to me for creation. (Ratnam 2008)

Ratnam founded the Arangham Trust in 1992 which is a cultural foundation that explores, enriches and promotes the performing and visual arts of India and seeks to contemporize the rich tapestry of Indian creativity for modern audiences. "Through collaborations, workshops, seminars and cultural outreach activities, numerous talented but lesser-known artistes have found a voice and a platform" (Ratnam 2008) under the aegis of the Trust which is doing pioneering work in reviving a tenth century performance art unique to the temples in Southern Tamil Nadu. As a past con-

vener of the Natya Kala Conference, when she was asked about the importance of such conferences, she replied:

Dance writing seminars and dance videos and films should be included in the future for international visitors to enjoy and appreciate such conferences. We can clearly see how international interests/understanding has a direct impact on the cultural practices of a different nation, here on a dance form seen as traditional, classical and a symbol of nationalism [...]. Traditional communities of dancers and musicians and their invaluable repertoire and literature of ritual performances like 'Kaisiki Natakam' (now in its 10th year) are being sustained and revived so that their art can breathe again. [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com) is a path-breaking directory of Indian dance that has become an essential guide and networking tool for the international dance community. (Ratnam 2008)

Priyadarsini Govind is a graduate in commerce from the University of Madras, Chennai, and holds a diploma in Mass Communication, but Bharatanatyam has been her first love ever since she was six. She is one of the best-known Bharatanatyam dancers among the current generation. Trained by two greats, Kalaimamani S.K. Rajarathnam Pillai and Padma Bhushan Smt. Kalanidhi Naryanan, and combined with her natural talents and dedication, her reputation as a dancer is exemplary. "With her natural aptitude for abhinaya coupled with her passion and dedication to her art, Priyadarsini has become a flag bearer for Smt. Kalanidhi's padam repertoire. Priyadarsini's nritta or pure dance is intense and vigorous" ("Priyadarsini Govind"). Her contribution to dance through her stint at the Kalakshetra is immense. She has performed and travelled widely in India and abroad and is the recipient of the prestigious "Nriya Choodamani Award" in addition to many others. On the web portal *Sabhash*, she is described as "A dancer known for her adherence to tradition, Priyadarsini manages to seamlessly blend new choreography with the traditional, thereby gently redefining the boundaries of Bharatanatyam repertoire." Govind spoke of the changing tastes of audiences and was asked if she did not prefer to be a connoisseur's dancer, and if it was easy to be in the mainstream. She responded: "It's not really easy. Sometimes I may want to include items which I love very much, but if they are too heavy and do not go well with the audience and then I avoid performing them and choose simpler songs, where the melody

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or raga is already familiar and the sentiment expressed is more popular” (Govind). She gives examples of this:

Sometimes, when I perform abroad, I do take up very heavy Kshetranya padams, where the tempo is very slow, the idea expressed is very subtle, there are wonderful audiences for it. But at other places, if an audience is uninitiated, and the interest is less, then if I were to doze them with a heavy padam which they cannot understand, then they would be put off by the Bharatanatyam programme, because I'm not stimulating their interest to come again. Here I would probably take up a Bhajan, where the music is simple and captivitating and the idea is simple—the love of a mother for her child and of how she thinks he is the best—this is something they would easily understand. When communication is complete where the person communicating is successful and when the audience gets what the dancer wants to say, then you make them want to come back. The interest is generated. You have added one more person to your audience. (Govind)

Evident in the above conversations is the influence of film, multicultural approaches and international trends on Bharatanatyam. The international influence on the practice, performance and innovation of the dance form in current times in India and abroad is quite evident in the ideas expressed by these well-established Bharatanatyam exponents. The dancers perform and innovate for foreign learners and audiences both in India and internationally. They are open to responding to audience tastes in India and abroad and willing to simplify the performance to hold the interest of different audiences. Younger teachers are open to innovations and are incorporating strategies of modern Indian and Western dance forms into their dance sequences. “Tyaag (the Yoga and Art Group) is a collective of Delhi-based dancers and musicians who strive to achieve a holistic artistic education. Tyaag member and Kathak Kendra graduate Sushmita Ghosh spent twelve years teaching and performing in Britain before relocating to New Delhi in 2002” (Prickett 2007: 32). Not only in the dance forms, these influences are seen in the methods of teaching also. “Ghosh (2003) speaks of the need to incorporate more details into the dance training: In the guru-shishya tradition it is ‘I play, I dance, you watch and you learn’. If you are not with him 24 hours a day, it is very difficult to just watch and learn.” She goes on to say that she has learnt a lot from contemporary dance, such as the use of language, and has realized that it can

be a very effective tool in teaching (2007: 32). So we can conclude by saying that the traditional dances are impacted by translocal influences and create their own 'space' which is not geographical. Also, as Shanti Pillai explains, "Just as cultural forms travel and are translated and transformed, they then travel back to their sites of origin, where they have consequences for the ways in which local populations practice and consume them" (2002: 15).

#### BHARATANATYAM IN THE USA

Srinivasan's book, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* tells us that many Indian dancers travelled to and lived in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Working from archival sources, she names some of the more important individuals, including: Oomdah, Bhooribai, Sahebjan, and Ala Bundi. Of their performances, one of the most memorable appears to have been at a show called "Durbar of Delhi" performed at Coney Island, then viewed by Ruth St. Denis who was greatly influenced by it. St. Denis is known as one of the 'mothers' of modern American dance. Influenced by the Coney Island performance, she established her dance career as a solo dancer and as a choreographer of Asian dances. Many Indian dancers, men and women, performed with her for several years as she toured. Slowly these dancers faded away and by the late 1920s there were few Indians left in the United States (2012: 9). This was a result of the anti-immigration policies of the US government at the time. During the Roosevelt administration, the Immigration Act of 1907 sought to discourage immigration by doubling the initial immigration tax from two dollars to four, banning most Asian immigrants as part of highly restrictive measures. The 1924 Act also fully excluded both Asian and black immigrants, while severely limiting Jewish immigrants. At this time, 164,000 immigrants were admitted each year; however, the quota was reduced again to 150,000 immigrants in 1929 under President Hoover ("United States Immigration Policy"). It was only in 1965 that large numbers of Indians began to enter the United States again. Unlike the earlier dancers/immigrants, the new wave of dancers/immigrants mostly stayed on in the US and were eventually granted citizenship. It is from these dancers/immigrants that dance schools

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and dance companies were established in the US. Katrak states that “Bharatanatyam is the dominant Indian classical dance form performed and taught in the USA since post 1965 when sets of Bharatanatyam dance practitioners such as Viji Prakash, Medha Yodh, Ramaa Bharadvaj and Ramya Harishankar from South and Southeast Asia migrated to the Southern California” (Banerjee 2013: 21–22). The phenomenon of independent Indian women as wage-earning dance gurus is a diasporic manifestation of transcultural migration (Srinivasan 2012: 13). As mentioned earlier, this was a practice unlikely in India where male dance gurus dominated the dance arena while the female teachers were never accorded the revered status a guru commanded. In addition to creating a patriarchal structure, this also opened up the possibility of sexual exploitation by the guru especially because the guru-*shishya* (teacher-student) relationship demanded a complete surrender by the student “necessitating an unquestioning deference towards the guru” (Prickett 2007: 27). A recent newspaper article titled, “The Problem of Groping Gurus and Silent Shishyas” in *The Sunday Times*, as a follow-up to the MeToo allegation against two famous musician brothers, speaks of the helpless position some women artistes, dancers and musicians were often reduced to. According to the writer of the article, Malini Nair, “One of the worst-kept secrets of the tight-knit Indian classical arts circles is the predatory behaviour a lot of women artistes have to deal with—and it comes not just from all-powerful gurus but also from other men who wield influence, such as the accompanists and organisers.” She writes further: “If you are close enough to these circles, you will hear horrific stories of normalised misogyny.” Women who dedicate their lives to their art, have no choice but to suffer the unwanted attention as the guru could destroy their career if they spurned his advances. Neela Bhagat, a Hindustani vocalist says, “So, the guru was great, the man was not. I saw the difference but many women students found it hard to reconcile the contradiction” (Nair 2020). The reason why the guru is so revered and this relationship is different from any other student-teacher relationship is because the “Indian classical arts traditions place the guru on a near mythical pedestal, beyond question and reproof” (Nair 2020). While the guru-*shishya* relation-

ship does place the woman in a vulnerable position if the guru is male, it does not mean that all gurus abuse the power they wield. *Shishyas* often speak very highly of their gurus:

Bharatanatyam exponent Leela Samson explained that the bond between guru and shishya surpassed that of parental love: 'It carried over into the realm of that which kept one centred through life, that which gave joy beyond one's occupation, beyond family ties, disappointments, tragedies, change. The guru gave, especially in the arts, a sight of worlds beyond the now—almost like a philosophical guide or religious leader, but without the dogma.' (Prickett 2007: 26–27)

But Prickett goes on to say that "Changes to teaching, the increased institutionalisation of dance, and shifts in patronage have resulted in artistic compromises undertaken for financial and professional survival, all of which can undermine the foundations of the guru-shishya relationship (Prickett 2007: 27). Thus, keeping in view the tradition and complexities of the guru-shishya relationship, the emergence of female gurus in the US was an extremely significant change.

Against all odds, legal and socioeconomic, the Indian dancers in the US have attained the model minority status through their teaching of dance to young Indian girls, staging performances at cultural events and working with communities during Indian festivals. They live their negotiations of "cultural citizenship" through performance as minority subjects (Srinivasan 2012: 16). Faced with a foreign culture, most Indian American parents want their daughters to be familiar with their native Indian culture and traditional Indian dances, Bharatanatyam being the most popular becomes the means to do so. According to Srinivasan, "The guru position allows the first-generation female gurus to negotiate male dominance in the immigrant Indian community and mainstream patriarchy" (2012: 124). These female gurus are also given the authority to shape the community's cultural identity and through performing it on stage and disciplining young girls (Srinivasan 2012: 124).

#### INTERVIEWS OF AMERICAN DANCERS

Kamala Lakshman is a dancer awarded both in India and the US, Kamala Lakshman has had a successful career in dance for more

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than fifty years. She started dancing at the age of four and gave her first performance when she was only five years old. She trained under different teachers, the most well-known being Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, who helped her to refine her dance form. She performed not only on the stage but also in films and became extremely popular; “Between the 1940s and the 1970s, [she] represented India at cultural festivals and events all over the world and performed before many world dignitaries, including Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of her coronation in 1953 and former US President Eisenhower during his state visit to India in 1959” (“Kamala Lakshmi”). In 1980, she migrated to the US and established her dance school, the Sri Bharatha Kamalalaya School of Dance and has been teaching dance for the last 35 years. She is eighty-five years old and has trained hundreds of students in the US where she lives. Asked if she finds any difference in approach to dance by foreign students as compared to Indian students, she says:

Foreign students don't get the feeling of devotion. They are sincere in practice, take their work seriously, don't think 'this is enough.' They are a little stiff sometimes. Ballet means flexibility, a modern dancer is acrobatic. They are trained to speak with their bodies, without moving the muscles in their faces. So facial expressions are a little difficult for them. Footwork is also not their strong point. But when foreign students start learning Indian dance from their teens, these problems are minimal. (Lakshman 2000)

One also learns that, among the thirty one students she had at the time of the interview, though many males were interested, there was only one male student, Vivek Ramakrishnan, “and he's good” (Lakshman 2000). Asked about the craze Indian dancers in the US have for performing in the December season in Chennai at their own cost, she explains, “They need good reviews, which they have to submit back in the US in order to get grants which they use to produce their dance dramas. If you make a good name in your hometown, you can make it good anywhere” (Lakshman 2000).

Tara Catherine Pandeya is an Indian American dancer from California born to an Indian American father and a German American mother who is also a trained Bharatanatyam dancer. She left the Cirque du Soleil where she was a principal dancer because

of her passion to promote Central Asian dance. She is known for her dancing, choreography and teaching as much as she is known for her scholarship and cultural activism. She has been promoting dance forms and styles of the Central Asian Silk Road region and “wants to use dance as an instrument to build dialogue, interest, tolerance and cross-cultural understanding between the Eastern and Western cultures” (Rathore 2017). Pandeya is a trained dancer in many dance forms, including Bharatanatyam, traditional Middle Eastern dance, modern dance, tap and ethno-contemporary dance, and dances from Central Asia. Being familiar with varied cross-cultural dance forms, she sees great similarity between the dances and cultures of India and Central Asia. The fusion of different forms is a perfect example of translocality in her dance performances. In an interview with *India-West*, she speaks of her life’s mission to expose larger audiences to these art forms so that they can value them. She further says:

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The stories that are being told are being filtered through one lens. Although I’m an outsider to the region, sometimes it’s also a double-sided education: educating western audiences that there are classical forms, and audiences of the diaspora from Central Asia that these dance forms and art traditions are worth saving [...]It’s like a beautiful visual textbook for cultural heritage and collective world heritage that is vital and crucial. (Rathore 2017)

Speaking about these overlapping and cross-cultural roots, she remarks:

Not only because I’m obsessed with the styles, and artistically they are interesting, but also because I feel finding a part of our collective history and finding these shared intersecting points also builds cultural bridges, and tolerance, that when people get too pundit about classical forms or they are unaware of other countries and regions which have very sophisticated, highly technical classical forms. (Rathore 2017)

From the interviews excerpted above, it is clear that, undoubtedly, the changes, trends and innovations of the dance form in India have a direct bearing on the dance as it is practiced in the US. Furthermore, the local influences in the US also exert an influence on the performance of Bharatanatyam, especially among the second-generation dancers in the US. They experiment

with the story to be conveyed through the dance, the dress, the facial expressions and the dance movements. They innovate so as to make the dance more understandable and interesting for the current generation. Local tastes in aesthetics, dance and music are bound to exert an influence on the dance form. Other dance forms like ballet, jazz, hip-hop, and other international dance forms are synthesized to create innovative dance dramas. Commenting on the second-generation Bharata Natyam dance practitioners in California, Ketu H. Katrak says, they “create new choreography using contemporary, even feminist themes, basing their work on their training in the most popularly studied traditional classical dance style from India, namely Bharata Natyam along with other movement vocabularies such as modern dance, jazz, and yoga” (2004; 79). He also speaks of their involvement with “popular cultural practices such as dance in the Southern California diasporic South Asian American community, and innovations to ‘tradition’ within a local/global context of cultural politics” (2004:79).

Dance teachers have also pointed out the differences in body language among female learners of the Indian diaspora. In India the girls are taught to be more gentle, subservient and docile, which is reflected in their body language and expressions. The bodies of the girls in the US are relatively stiff and their facial expressions not so emotive. This becomes particularly relevant in cultures where gender behaviors are rigid and stereotypical, which include how you express yourself through the body movements. The Indian woman is supposed to carry herself with a docility, coyness, subservience, femininity and grace, which is then reflected in the dance movements and similarly the male is expected to reflect through the body, a stance of boldness, aggression and masculinity reflected in the dance form too. The dance form then, when practiced in a different culture, will reflect that same local culture. While the Indian learners accept the instructions with blind faith, the Indian American learners are more questioning, especially about gender and moral issues inherent in the learning and practice of Bharatanatyam:

Second-generation dancers bring new illuminations on tradition especially in representations of femininity and female sexuality that is

depicted from a feminist stance rather than a more conservative, patriarchal delineation of the female body. They demonstrate the paradox that there is much in the tradition to value and celebrate and much that needs to be challenged. Their playing with tradition translates as choreographing new work that uses Bharata Natyam and other dance movement and gesture vocabularies for autobiographical pieces, exploring personal identity, family and gender dynamics, and moving outward into social issues connected to contemporary life in the US. (Katrak 2004: 87–88)

In keeping with the social realities of their lives, “Racial and gender inequalities are evoked and given feminist and progressive interpretations. Feminist re-interpretations of popular songs use the gesture vocabulary of traditional *padams* (lyric poems)” (Katrak 2004: 87–88). Bharatanatyam is still primarily a dance practiced by women, very few males taking it up as a hobby or profession either in India or in the US. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler states that “One is not simply a body, but in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (1988: 521). But doing the body differently is often met with resistance and we see that unfold in Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man*, a play set in the 1950s that highlights the gender stereotypes prevalent in India where a male dancing body is viewed as effeminate in the strictly patriarchal society.

The way one holds one’s body is determined by individual variation, along with different body types and movements. This is reflected in Kamala Lakshman’s statement that foreign students have a relatively stiff body. In all dance forms, the body type plays a great role in determining the moves of the particular dance form. This is equally if not more applicable to Bharatanatyam. It is also pertinent to note Kamala Lakshman’s comment above that the dancers from the US need good reviews in India as that will help them in getting grants in the US. Thus we can see that the factors impacting the practice of Bharatanatyam and its transnational and translocal implications are indeed varied—they are related to economics, gender, identity, culture, region and nation.

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## CONCLUSIONS

From its very inception to the contemporary times, Bharatanatyam has been influenced by transnational and translocal connections. The innovations in the dance form as a result of local and international influences as expressed in all of the above interviews, reflect this translocal and transnational impact quite clearly. The innovations are based on the audience responses and expectations. Performances both in India and abroad are planned by keeping international audiences in mind. Influences that include local cultures, dance forms, and individual aesthetics also play a substantial role in determining the changes the dance form has incorporated.

For the diasporic Indian, a traditional Indian dance like Bharatanatyam becomes a token of Indianism, more often taken up as a way to express one's Indian cultural heritage and identity and less as a passionate engagement with the form that one finds among Indian dancers. For the diasporic Indians, this tokenism becomes a way of expressing their identity, leading to the commercialization of the dance form and molding it into a more audience friendly, but less rigorous form.

Bharatanatyam has also become a form of labor for the large number of women who cannot legally work in a foreign country. This becomes an important factor among the other transnational factors that impact the dance form. Laws and immigration policies decide what categories of Indians migrate to the host country. In America, the major categories include the contract labor, F1 student visas, H1 work visas, green card holders and citizens. The people who fall under these categories then constitute the Indian American population and that too impacts the attitudes to the learning and practice of the dance form. Depending on the changes in laws, various time periods have seen the migration of different kinds of classes of migrants. If in the 1920s, a large number of contract labor visas were issued, after the 1960s, a large number of visas were issued to the middle-class educated professional Indians. All these factors play a significant role in the cultural tastes and practices of the migrants.

In the patriarchal Indian society, where women are seen as the carriers of culture, this becomes another reason for women,

particularly diasporic Indian women to propagate their cultural practices, classical dance being one of them. As a result, women are primarily the teachers and learners of Bharatanatyam in the US, male dancers being negligible and male teachers of Bharatanatyam in the US practically nonexistent.

After Bharatanatyam attained its current respectable status after Independence in India, the gurus could only be male. A guru in the dance tradition was the head of a particular school or style of the dance form known as the *gharana*. To be accepted as an authentic classical dancer, one had to belong to a *gharana* or perform in a particular style, with little scope for individual experimentation. Interestingly, though the dancers were mostly female, including early teachers, usually belonging to the *devadasi* families, the head or guru of a *gharana* was male as the society would not allow a place of authority or domination to a woman. The guru-shishya relationship was unique in the dance traditions where a guru controlled the student's dance career to a large extent. Without the guru's patronage, the shishya could not progress and had to be subservient to the guru. This often led to complete surrender by the student to the teacher often resulting in sexual exploitation and favoritism. With women dominating the dance arena in the US, for the first time women gurus established themselves and had a major influence on the Bharatanatyam scene in India. This can be seen as an extremely significant transnational influence on Bharatanatyam in India. It loosened the hold of male gurus and led to the increasing acceptability of female gurus.

The impact of translocal and transnational influences on Bharatanatyam has led to innovations and creativity which may be seen as progressive and leading to the enrichment of the dance form, but orthodox and elder proponents of Bharatanatyam see it as a meddling with the classical purity and a dilution of its classical tradition. The regional and national politics also play an important role in determining local and international attitudes towards the dance form. In her article, "Rethinking Global Indian Dance through Local Eyes: The Contemporary Bharatanatyam Scene in Chennai," Pillai highlights that "globalization of local traditions does not necessarily translate into a newly invigorated life for those practices." Taking the example of young NRI Bharatanatyam dancers

who come to Chennai for their debut performance, Pillai explains how there is resentment among the local learners as they feel that these NRI performers give substandard performances but are able to do so as they have money and connections which some local dancers cannot afford. A dance performance can be an expensive affair considering that a venue needs to be booked, accompanists are required, the expensive costuming, and the accompanying refreshments typically provided during intermission or after the performance. Reminiscing about such an incident in Chennai, Pillai says, “The fact that the concept of ‘globalization’ is often used to cloak a process that generates inequalities derived from differential access to markets and international cultural brokers” weighed on her mind. But, on the other hand, there are experts in the field who believe that the NRIs bring “enthusiasm,” “energy” and innovations to the dance form (2002: 15). In this context Pillai further elaborates:

Discussions about globalization tend to fall somewhere between two poles. One invokes the paranoia of what Appadurai (1996) refers to as a McDonaldization of the world, in which local practices, identities, and economies give way to the homogenizing mandates of capitalism. The other rejoices over the emergence of so-called hybrid cultural forms, interpreted as signs of the resilience of non-Western societies, as harbingers of the dawn of some new age of multicultural understanding [...] . (2002: 14)

To conclude, I would say that, despite power dynamics, labour exploitation and the role of economic factors sometimes seen in transnational exchanges, the transnational and translocal innovations and the impact on the role reversals in the gender politics of the dance form, have undoubtedly enriched Bharatanatyam in India as well as its practice in the US. The local status of Bharatanatyam is symbolically and economically stronger because of its global connections.

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