



**PEDAGOGICAL SHIFTS IN BHARATHANATYAM:  
CASE STUDIES IN DURBAN-SOUTH AFRICA AND CHENNAI-INDIA  
(2019 & 2020)**

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## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores pedagogical shifts in Bharathanatyam in Durban, South Africa and Chennai, India in the 2000s. It questions the state of Bharathanatyam teaching in South Africa today in order to understand its role in a multicultural context. Chapter One forms the rationale and background to the study. It begins by offering a contextual frame of the histories and cultural politics in South Africa and India. It discusses Dance and the beginnings of Indian Dance in South Africa, ending with reflections of Bharathanatyam pedagogy, post 1994 in South Africa. The literature review spans across Chapters Two and Three, which look broadly at critical pedagogy and expanded views of culture. Notions in Dance pedagogy by Sue Stinson (1999), Sherry B. Shapiro (2004), Liane Loots (2006) and Sharon Friedman (2011) are accessed to discuss western pedagogical paradigms. These are contrasted by Suparna Banerjee (2013), Sunil Kothari (2007) and Shanti Pillai (2002) whose critique of the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* offers a counterpoint of the dominant western hegemony. Janet O'Shea (2009) and Ketu Katrak (2011) aid in the understanding of Bharathanatyam as a 'carrier of culture' in the Motherland and diaspora.

A qualitative research methodology was deployed to uncover practices by teachers in Chennai and Durban. This study will investigate how some traditional gesticulations such as *Adavus*, *hastas* and posture are not being rigidly upheld in the teaching of Bharathanatyam by certain teachers. Unstructured interviews, participant observation and a discussion of *baani* from case studies was utilized. Some of the major findings of the study included observations of a dilution of *Adavu* teaching in Durban, the marginalisation of *Bhakti* and the genealogical mapping of the Tanjore/Pandanallur *baani*. A proposal for the institutionalisation of Bharathanatyam is made.

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## CHAPTER ONE – *ALARIPU*

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will explore the teaching and learning of Bharathanatyam<sup>1</sup> in Durban and Chennai. Each chapter is laid out in the structure of the traditional Bharathanatyam Dance repertoire known as the *Margam* as a paradigmatic roadmap. *Margam* means a path or a course followed. It is one full definite course wherein Dance items are performed in a traditional order. The items that are included are *Alarippu*, *Jatiswaram*, *Shabdam*, *Varnam*, *Padam* and *Thillana*.

The current younger generation of students in South Africa are seemingly not being fully exposed to opportunities to experience traditional concepts and elements of the Dance form of Bharathanatyam. I have made trips to Chennai since 2000 during which I took lessons in Bharathanatyam, including with the renowned Bharathanatyam teacher Adyar Lakshman. It was during these travels that I began questioning the content and the manner in which I was being taught this Dance form in South Africa when compared to the teaching of the Dance form in Chennai.

The correct teaching methods must be inculcated at as young an age as possible. There is a saying that, “If the farmer wants the sapling to grow into a strong adult tree, he must prune the sapling” (Hackney, 2008:178). However, the notion of a correct teaching method is debatable as the applicability of such a method differs in diverse genres of Dance. In this dissertation which interrogates Bharathanatyam and its pedagogical aspects, I will examine how Bharathanatyam is not only a performing art form, but also a spiritual practice or *bhakti* which means devotion to God. While this Dance form encompasses bodily movements, it also calls for the dancer to be spiritually-immersed in its enactment of *bhakti*.

The dissertation will also ask how a Dance form like Bharathanatyam should be taught, and by whom? The live observation of children learning this Dance form with special focus on the pedagogy employed by the teacher/guru will serve as one of the key aspects of my data; the

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that there are some variations in the way Bharatha Natyam/Bharat(h)anatyam/ Bharathanatyam is used. However, for the purpose of this research I have chosen to spell it as Bharathanatyam as a clear sign of the intertwined relationship between notions of India(ness) (Bharath) and Dance(natyam). Given the numerous repetitions of the name of the Dance form, I have chosen not to italicise this technically “foreign” word throughout the text.

other being interviews with various teachers. It is located in notions of best teaching practice as discussed by Dance scholars such as Sue Stinson, (1999), Liane Loots (2006) and Sherry B Shapiro (2004). I acknowledge at the outset that these are largely examples from a Western context which may be problematic for the cultural form of Bharathanatyam with its origins in India.

Times have indeed changed but it is also opportune that the new generation of Bharathanatyam Dancers in South Africa in the 2000s be reintroduced to the heritage, literature, music, traditional concepts and compositions of the form. All these elements combine to give greater meaning and appreciation of the Dance form, rather than a crude practice of merely stamping the feet.

From my observation and personal experience of learning Bharathanatyam in Durban, I am of the view that the pedagogy falls short of the teaching methods that I have witnessed and experienced in Chennai. This includes attending several Dance performances as well as visiting Dance schools such as Kalakshetra, which can be argued as the birthplace of contemporary Bharathanatyam given its revival in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by (amongst others) Rukmini Devi Arundale (discussed in detail hereafter). In order to confirm my impression that there is in fact a glaring disparity between teaching in Chennai and Durban, I have conducted an ethnographic study as proposed by Deidra Sklar (1991). I spent six months, approximately 24 weeks in total, undergoing intense Bharathanatyam training in Chennai, India, from September 2019 to March 2020. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, I was forced to make a sudden return to South Africa. Since April 2020, I have continued my intensive Bharathanatyam lessons, two to three times a week, online.

I was trained in Bharathanatyam in South Africa by Yogambal Singaram since the age of five. I visited Chennai once a year for a rapid and intense course of studying since the age of 10. Whilst in Chennai, I was able to attend the annual classical Dance season during *Margazhi*<sup>2</sup> where many Bharathanatyam performances by dancers from around the globe take place as well as conferences on many aspects of the Dance. In this space, I have noticed an amalgamation of the artistic as well as spiritual dimension of Bharathanatyam.

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<sup>2</sup> A month in the *Tamil* calendar, *Margazhi* is dedicated to the Indian classical arts in Chennai made up of many classical Dance and music festivals.

Having studied Dance at University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) between 2014 - 2018, I have a rudimentary understanding of a range of teaching methods used in varying Dance forms e.g., the teaching of African contemporary and Ballet. My understanding of Bharathanatyam and its teaching stems from a much longer period, and as indicated above, has been added to with each new encounter with reputable teachers in Chennai. In this dissertation I conduct a comparative analysis (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009) of the pedagogies deployed in Durban and in Chennai. I attempt to specifically theorise the variance in pedagogical approach as employed in the South African context.

The data that I have gathered includes transcribed interviews, first-hand experiences of observing young students undergoing training, with special focus on how children are being taught Bharathanatyam as an art and spiritual form. In addition, I attended lecture demonstrations by world-renowned teachers and *Gurus* such as Rama Vaidyanathan, Padma Subrahmanyam and Priyadarshni Govind. I conducted multiple interviews with six selected Dance practitioners, some of whom are revered names in the Bharathanatyam fraternity. My data emanates from a combination of Dance teachers, Dance academia and present performers of Bharathanatyam. This group is spread across both Durban and Chennai.

Finally, I include reflections from my own diary entries and field notes, which I made at numerous Dance performances, workshops, masterclasses, seminars and conference events that took place during the two years of my research.

## **Background & Rationale to this study**

This study has as one of its triggers, a community workshop that I conducted in 2018 at the Aryan Benevolent Home (ABH) which is in Chatsworth (a suburb that was marked 'for Indians only' during the Apartheid era). I informally tested support for Indian Dance by non-Indian students in 2018 when I was given the chance to work with a group of young non-Indian children at the ABH Bhai Rambharos Children's Home. I conducted six Dance classes at ABH, teaching basic Bharathanatyam steps (*Adavus*) and simple hand gestures (*hastas*). As a Bharathanatyam Dance teacher, I needed a comprehensive background in the Dance form. I went to each class prepared with a lesson plan with a specific aim and objective and desired learning outcome in mind. In developing the lesson plan, I had in mind that I would be working

with children between the ages 7 - 10 years. This meant that I needed to come up with a lesson that was educational but at the same time would be accessible for the children. In light of a non-dictatorial-teaching approach that I had adopted, I decided to allow the children the chance to explore the steps and hand gestures and come up with their own way of understanding the techniques and nuances of Bharathanatyam while I took over the role of a guide and muse. My short stint of teaching Indian Dance at ABH made me wonder whether any person, irrespective of colour, caste or creed could learn Bharathanatyam? What would be required of teachers to provide rich lessons in Bharathanatyam? I am mindful of the limits of my ABH experiment and still have many more questions, for example, what happens if a Bharathanatyam class was taught by a 'non-Indian'? What happens if the class comprises 'non-Indians'? What would happen if the teaching approach was unstructured/democratic, with no obvious lesson plan? How will we as teachers know that children have learnt anything at all?

Bharathanatyam is a Dance form which in South Africa is more associated with Indian people in the city of Durban on the east coast of Kwa-Zulu-Natal (KZN) which has a large Indian population.<sup>3</sup> KZN is a veritable multicultural stage for an assortment of Dance genres with roots steeped in Africa, the Indian sub-continent and Europe. Bharathanatyam in South Africa can be regarded as "the Indian equivalent of Ballet and is seen by mothers as helping their daughters develop the poise and grace of middle-class Indian girls" (Maree, 2008:118). My concern and argument are that traditional Bharathanatyam in South Africa is in danger of extinction. Historically, Bharathanatyam was practised in geographical areas which were predominantly Indian under the Group Areas Act<sup>4</sup>. Now that we are a democratic country, constitutionally free of prejudices based on race, religion and language, there is no need for art forms, in my view, to be racially segregated. That said, the study will observe how different race groups interact differently with Bharathanatyam.

### **Positionality of researcher**

I am an experienced Bharathanatyam Dancer, Dance enthusiast, choreographer, researcher, Dance critic and Theatre-maker based in Durban, South Africa. I have completed my Bachelor

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<sup>3</sup> KwaZulu-Natal is one of the nine provinces of South Africa, located on the coast.

<sup>4</sup> The Group Areas Act assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas under the system of Apartheid.

of Arts (Honours) in Drama and Performance Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College), Durban, South Africa. I have been enrolled for Bharathanatyam Dance training with Yogambal Singaram in Durban since the age of five and currently I am pursuing intensive Bharathanatyam training through Skype with Chennai-based Priya Murle. I am a female, fourth generation descendent of Indians living in South Africa. I am a 'born-free' / post-1994 South African, and I am specifically of *Tamil* Indian descent. I am deeply influenced by my Indian heritage and background. This study acknowledges my deep curiosity of the practice and form of Bharathanatyam in South Africa and scholarly studies on Indian Dance forms in South Africa that have come before me, especially the works by Sathasivan Annamalai (1992 & 1998), Vasugi Singh (2000) and Anushia Pillay (2019). Furthermore, I concede that I am daunted by the heavy burden and responsibility which I bear that stems from the groundbreaking nature of my study of some of the teaching practices in Bharathanatyam in South Africa.

I understand this to be the very first of its specific kind at the University of Cape Town. Many other ethnographic studies of Indian Music such as Nixon (2008) and of Indian communities by Ashwin Desai and Goolam H Vahed (2007 & 2010) comment indirectly on Indian cultural life and mention Bharathanatyam but, from my initial research, it would appear that my historical sleuthing here is amongst the first of such systematic research work by a student at the Master's level.



**Image 1: Saranya Devan aged 10 yrs with respected Dance guru, Adyar Lakshmanan in Chennai , 2007. Photograph: Private collection of the author.**

A significant moment in my Dance journey was when I took lessons from one of Rukmini Devi Arundale's first students, Adyar Lakshman, at his Dance studio in Chennai in 2007.<sup>5</sup> He is also the *Guru* of the internationally-reputed Anita Ratnam. This respected Dance master was overtly critical of the form of Bharathanatyam I had been taught in South Africa.

I am proud of my cultural practice when I Dance; I do not just Dance but I fall into a state of trance-like spirituality as I take on the role of a God, a Goddess, or a Higher Being. In these instances, I found such joy and reached a high level of spiritual consciousness. As I encountered other South African Bharathanatyam Dancers, I realised that many of the Dancers were not exposed to the pursuit of the spiritual components of the Dance. This prompted me to investigate this phenomenon further. Like so many other facets of life where economics now dominate, it would appear that even the teaching of Bharathanatyam has been influenced by monetary considerations which may be impacting on what is being taught in the Dance classroom.

Many classes have a large number of pupils and whilst this may generate more fees for the teacher (the commercialisation of Dance is explored later on in this research), in my opinion not enough time and attention can be given to individual pupils to instil the pure *Bhakti* or devotion that is required for Bharathanatyam

This study will interrogate in greater detail whether profit is now being placed before teaching which should also inculcate *Bhakti*. Through my research, I wish to theorise the changing practice in the teaching and learning of Bharathanatyam by focusing on the experience of girls aged 5 -12 years in Durban as compared to similar group in Chennai. I will be comparing South African teachers Manormani Govender, Kantharuby Munsamy and Yogambal Singaram to Chennai teachers Priya Murle, Uma Anand and Sreedevi Priya. The South African and Chennai teachers in pairs, shared the same Gurus in Chennai. My research will examine the value placed by teachers and pupils on the traditional Dance form which includes *Bhakti* and what led to changes towards what I consider meaningless /robotic movements. The next chapter

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<sup>5</sup> I had the good fortune of taking some lessons from Adyar Sir as he is referred to in India as a mark of respect.

interrogates possible factors that may be contributing to shifting practices of Bharathanatyam in South Africa today<sup>6</sup>.

### **Contextual frames: history and cultural politics in South Africa and India**

It is necessary to understand and briefly locate the history of Bharathanatyam in my research in order to see what aspects of transformation and shifts have taken place down the ages especially in South Africa.

In India, the Maratha rulers of South India in the 17th century referred to the form of Indian Dance known as Bharathanatyam today as *Sadir Nautch* or salon Dance when it was presented in their courts. *Sadir* dancing can be traced back to the period of the *Puranas*<sup>7</sup> in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. (Kalaivani, 2015). The tradition of the *Devadasi* culture can be traced back to as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., particularly in the southern parts of India during the reign of the *Cholas*, *Cheras*, and *Pandyas*. The *Devadasis* were ritualistic performers - they were good Dancers and singers. They were well treated and respected and enjoyed a high social status in society (Banerjee 2013). A more exalted role of the Dance is evoked by the name *Dasi Attam*, the Dance of the *Devadasis* as a part of temple worship. A *Devadasi*, which translated means servant (*dasi*) of divinity/God (*Deva*), was an artist dedicated to the services of a temple. The Dance of the *Devadasi* was integral to the act of ritual worship by Hindu worshippers. (Soneji, 2012) *Devadasi* families specialised in the Indian performing arts of music and Dance, and with the *nattuvanars* (Dance masters), they maintained certain traditions from generation to generation, and were supported by royal patronage. Between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D., *Devadasis* who practised during the rule of the *Pallava* and *Chola* dynasties located in the southern parts of India, were treated with great respect and dignity (Kalaivani, 2015).

Years later, *Sadir Nautch* was renamed as Bharathanatyam. Soneji (2012) maintains that *Chinamalam* was the traditional term that was used by the people of that time, to describe a Bharathanatyam performance in terms of its poetic style and *abhinaya* – facial expressions and body language. Sculptural and literary evidence lodged at Kalakshetra<sup>8</sup>, indicates that

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<sup>6</sup> I humbly accept the powerful journalistic influence and pillar of support of my father, Yogin Devan who was the news editor of the Sunday Tribune newspaper (rival of the largest weekly publication, Sunday Times) in Durban.

<sup>7</sup> These were religious scriptures of that particular period said to have existed in pre-historic times.

<sup>8</sup> The Kalakshetra Foundation (formerly International Centre for Arts) is an institution for the preservation and conservation of the Indian performing arts and crafts, particularly Bharathanatyam Dance and Ghandharvaveda

Bharathanatyam, based on the treatises *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya Dharpana*, was used in temple worship throughout India (Samson, 2010). This original classical Dance tradition then deteriorated in North India due to repeated Mughal invasions in that region. Fortunately, the Dance tradition survived in South India, where it continued to be patronised by kings and maintained by the *Devadasi* system (Soneji, 2012).

With time the *Devadasis* had fallen upon dishonourable ways, partly due to a lack of patronage from the kings and elite, and changed social circumstances and norms including colonisation. Under British rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, widespread propaganda prevailed against many forms of Indian culture arts, especially Dance, misrepresenting forms such as Bharathanatyam as crude, immoral and inferior in relation to concepts and standards of Western civilisation. This influence and pressure to comply with colonial tastes, was persuasive enough to dissuade the continued patronage by the Indian royal courts of their ritual temple Dances and their performers, and to alienate these artistically rich, educated Indians i.e., the *Devadasi* families and their teachers from their long-held and profound traditions. The whole *Devadasi* system thus rapidly declined during the colonial period i.e., 19<sup>th</sup>- late 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Kersenboom, 1987)

Most *Devadasis* were forced to seek the patronage of other wealthy people. Sadly, the power dynamics of dependency remained, many becoming mere *dasis*, and in some cases prostitutes. This in turn diminished the reputation of the whole *Devadasis* community. “By 1818, *Devadasis* had deteriorated to prostituting themselves for money. *Devadasis* remained entertainers but their entertainment now was through their bodies. They evolved into practising courtesans skilled in the art of love- making” (Kalaivani, 2015:51). Even the terms by which the Dance was known - *Sadir Nautch* and *Dasi Attam* - took on derogatory connotations and some, according to R. Kalaivani (2015), were even indicted for tarnishing the sacred space i.e. the temple, by allowing *Devadasis* to perform there. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, social reformers under Western influence from the Theosophical Society who were dedicated to the uplifting of humanity through a better understanding of the oneness of

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music. It was founded in 1934 by Rukmini Devi Arundale and is located in the suburb/colony of over 100 acres in Thiruvanniyur, Chennai. Today the premises houses Dance and music studios, lecture rooms and a few auditoriums. Visitors attending performances can purchase handmade vegetable dyed , natural fabrics. Arundale’s goal was anchored in “Imparting to the young the true spirit of Art, devoid of vulgarity and commercialism” (see Kalakshetra website).

life, alongside some western Dancers who took advantage of these unsettled circumstances, launched an anti-*Nautch* campaign in 1947. This period saw the removal of all ritual Dances from temples. Their goal was to eradicate not only the prostitution that had come to be associated with *Devadasis*, but the art itself, condemning it as depraved and a social evil. By the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the classical Dance of South India was almost wiped out, even in Tamil Nadu.

A feminist movement by the *Devadasis* had begun in the 1890s to regain an identity resisting restrictions placed on them. The *Devadasis* further took testimonials to court to prove their innocence and argued that excluding women from dancing at temples was not the way to stop prostitution. They asked that new laws be invoked against any Dancers who acted as prostitutes at temples. The pleas fell on deaf ears. When the British arrived in India, they were puzzled by the women attached to temples which they found unacceptable as it led to sexual exploitation and decided to totally abolish that connection. Arguments were raised for and against such abolition and finally the Prevention of Dedication Act was passed on 26 November 1947. It was then that there emerged a high-profile personality, Rukmini Devi who can almost single-handedly be credited for reviving and reforming *Sadir* to Bharathanatyam. It took the influence of the American-based Theosophical Society, which teaches universal brotherhood and social improvement, to inspire Devi (her full name was Rukmini Devi Neelakanda Sastri) to elevate the plight of the *Devadasis*.

Devi was born into an upper-class *Brahmin*<sup>9</sup> family in Madurai in 1904. She grew up in an environment where she was exposed to Dance, music and culture. Her father was involved with the Theosophical Society and soon the young girl followed suit. She was greatly inspired by theosophist Annie Besant. Eventually her interest in theosophy<sup>10</sup> led her to marry a British fellow theosophist, Dr George Sydney Arundale. The interracial and intercultural marriage with a great age disparity between bride and groom shocked the colonial Indian society of the time. According to Leela Samson, “An Englishman of aristocratic descent, 41 years of age, to marry a girl of only 16, the daughter of a Sanskrit Vedanta scholar and high-caste *Brahmin* - it

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<sup>9</sup> A *Brahmin* is a member of the highest caste in Hinduism. They specialize as priests, teachers and maintaining sacred knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> Teaching about God and the world based on mystical insight under US influence.

was unthinkable” (2010:44). However, Kalaivani (2015) notes that years of happy marriage went by and activities within the Theosophical Society kept the unusual couple busy.

Arundale<sup>11</sup> had an interest in music, but it was her meeting with the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova<sup>12</sup> in London in 1924 which kindled in her a profound interest in the art form and a deep desire to want to Dance. Inspired by Pavlova, Arundale decided to salvage traditional Indian Dance forms and began learning Bharathanatyam. Pavlova did not only motivate Arundale but she was also known for having instilled in children a desire to learn Dance (specifically Ballet) and this was even evident in her visit to South Africa around 1926. Dulcie Howes, who became the founder of the UCT Ballet School in 1934, is also linked to this famed Russian star as Howes had Danced with Anna Pavlova’s company in 1927 before returning to South Africa (Grut, 1981:384).

Arundale’s obsession with Pavlova resulted in her following the Russian Dancer from country to country. Samson maintains that although Arundale had no initial desire to learn the form of Ballet, there was just something about watching Pavlova for her (Samson, 2010). Arundale admired Pavlova as a role model and even desired to Dance like her. She eventually built up the courage to start learning Ballet from Pavlova but unfortunately Pavlova passed away in 1931, shortening their journey as teacher and Dance student. Arundale continued to study Ballet with Cleo Nordi after Pavlova’s death (Samson, 2010).

If Arundale had not been part of the so-called caste system that operated in India at that time and had not been so heavily influenced by the Theosophical Society, would she have had the same capacity to resuscitate Bharathanatyam – a Dance form that had become associated with the *Devadasi* families who were now categorised as low caste Hindus in India? Arundale has commented, “I was the very first woman among *Brahmins* of cultured families to take to this art. Strangely, those who appreciated me most and supported me were the great musicians of the time. Even though they were orthodox [...]” (Samson, 2010:81). Perhaps not, as the caste system plays a significant role in India and would have defined Arundale as *Brahmin*/high caste, giving her certain upper-class privileges and the power to reform teaching methods and the spiritual focus of Bharathanatyam. Her husband, George Arundale, was after

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<sup>11</sup> All references following the date of her marriage will refer to her not as Devi but as Arundale.

<sup>12</sup> A *prima ballerina* of the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pavlova was the principal artist of the Imperial Russian Ballet before forming her own company. She was the contemporary of Nijinsky.

all a British subject and part of the colonial order. Furthermore, he became the president of the Theosophical Society when Besant died which would have given both George and Rukmini Devi Arundale a level of power and influence in Indian society which was still under British rule. Arundale also defied the norms of her Indian heritage and married a foreigner, but one that also gave her certain agency and privilege which people of a lower class would not have been able to access.

As one of very few authorities on Arundale's life, Samson recounts that other responsibilities came across Arundale's way and she moved on from Western influences. Arundale came across *Sadir* in 1932, presented by the *Pandanallur* sisters - Jeevaratnam and Rajalakshmi (Samson, 2010). This was what ignited in her the urge to learn *Sadir*. Samson reported that Arundale, "immediately expressed a desire to learn the art of *Sadir* and was quite determined too" (Samson, 2010:77) although given her social circumstances, it was difficult for her to find a teacher.

Arundale's quest to become a Bharathanatyam performer/disciple came to fruition when she finally found her teacher, Gowri Ammal. She was known as Mylapore Gowri Ammal as she was a *Devadasi* who hailed from the famous Mylapore Kapaleeswara temple in the then Madras (now Chennai), India (Samson, 2010). Arundale desired, however, to learn from the Pandanallur sisters' teacher, Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

Meenakshisundaram Pillai had consistently rejected Arundale as he thought her interest in learning Dance was a fleeting interest or hobby. Arundale underwent a review of her initial training with Mylapore Ammal by Meenakshisundaram Pillai's cousin Ponniah Pillai. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was finally convinced by the remarks of Ponniah Pillai's review that Arundale was in fact a dedicated student and thus he took her under his wing (Samson, 2010).

The conservative citizens of Chennai (then Madras as it was known under British rule), publicly ridiculed Arundale for breaking many orthodox rules of Bharathanatyam such as taking the Dance form out of the temple courtyard, none of which deterred her. In fact, this only made her more resolved to master the art (Samson 2010). Arundale replied to her community, noting that, "it is a beautiful Dance form and an extremely good example of how wonderful and how spiritual Indian art is" (Samson, 2010:87). After long sessions of learning, Arundale performed at the open air Adyar Theatre in 1935. The Nobel Laureate, Sir CV Raman, remarked

at this performance that, “some of you...must have been thrilled by what you just witnessed ...grace brought down from the heights of the Himalayas and put on the earth of this platform” (Deol, 2020).

Arundale had not only shattered Bharathanatyam’s bondages of caste and performance space, but she had shifted the Dance from the *sanctum sanctorum* of temples for the first time and presented the ritual temple Dance programme as a stage performance. She also rearranged the way in which musicians performed at these Dance programmes. Rather than the musicians following the Dancer on stage, moving back and forth with her, supporting musicians were for the first time assembled on one side of the stage. The prevalent seductive costumes and jewellery that temple prostitutes used to wear, were refashioned into aesthetically beautiful ones, copying the style found in ancient temple sculpture (Soneji, 2012). Arundale had started a reformation or renaissance in this art. But this was not enough for her as she was not satisfied that she Danced by herself and wanted many more young, dedicated people to join her and relentlessly worked for the revival of Bharathanatyam as a revised 20<sup>th</sup> century Dance form that no longer belonged solely within the temple precincts.

Arundale was determined to, in her words, “disseminate this beautiful and profound art that had been restricted to a few specialists” (Kalakshetra, 2019). She believed that a cultural renaissance would be meaningful in a country which was losing its identity. She wanted a revival of the traditional arts (Kalakshetra, 2019). Arundale’s fiery spirit and determination to create a school for the traditional arts, especially Dance, song and music, paid dividends when Kalakshetra was established in 1936. At the inauguration Arundale said, “My dream for our academy is that it should not merely serve to encourage the Arts as such, but should no less stimulate the spirit of Art in every department of Life” (Samson, 2010:97). With the same esteem, reverence and admiration that is accorded to world-famous universities such as Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford. According to a current Reader in Dance and Performance studies at Roehampton University, Avanthi Meduri, Arundale’s Kalakshetra was regarded “as a trans local, contemporary arts institution in which Rukmini Devi articulated a transnational history for Bharathanatyam connected to Europe (and) England” (2004:16). Arundale’s unique contribution was to destroy what was crude and vulgar in the inherited traditions of Dance and to replace them with sophisticated and refined taste (Meduri, 2004).

Thus, we see from Samson's earlier research, that for Arundale, Kalakshetra was not only an institution for the arts but a university of life. It was not devoid of learning about all aspects of life and thus culture - a term to which I will return to later in this study. The question becomes what should be taught, by whom, and most especially, how should such 'knowledge transfer' (Shulman, 1986) be achieved? Furthermore, would strict instructive methods rather than facilitatory and open methods, be more effective in passing down this Dance which is a form of prayer and simultaneously a form of performance.

In this next section, I will address the context of Dance in Durban, South Africa with its dominant Zulu, British and Indian cultural heritages. It is important to begin to trace the legacy of Bharathanatyam from India to South Africa and acknowledge the first generation of Bharathanatyam teachers in KwaZulu-Natal (Durban and Pietermaritzburg).

## **An Overview of Dance in South Africa**

South African-born Dance scholar and advocate, Lynn Maree, wrote, "In KwaZulu-Natal there are Zulu Dance groups in rural areas, in townships, and in hostels inside cities that are dedicated to preserving and advancing their traditional Dance form" (Maree, 2008:118). The Zulus are a dominant cultural group in KwaZulu-Natal and include Dance in important aspects of their lives such as weddings and funerals, according to Kariamuhle Welsh-Asante (2019), Maxwell Xolani Rani (2012) and Veit Erlman (1999). These African Dance scholars consider Dance a performative and spiritual act from the cradle to the grave. For example, one Dance when a child is born, for coming-of-age ceremonies, wedding ceremonies and when somebody dies<sup>13</sup>.

Marina Grut (1981) suggests that when European settlers arrived in South Africa, they brought with them their own Dance genres. The Dutch arrived in the Cape in 1652 under Jan van Riebeeck. They were followed over the next 200 years by the British, the French, German, Danish, Irish and Scottish settlers. (Grut, 1981) The most popular classical art form brought by

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<sup>13</sup> For example the world-renowned Reed Dance ritual that also takes place when young Zulu maidens present themselves to the King of the Zulus. Nowadays, this ceremony has social welfare benefits as it is used to educate young girls on the dangers of pre-marital sex. Many Zulus also Danced during wars and there was vibrant singing and the beating of drums. *Indlamu* is the Dance that is most associated with Zulu culture. It is derived from the war Dances. It is a Dance mostly by males and carried out in full regalia: head ornaments, ceremonial belts, rattles, shields and weapons. The performers demonstrate mastery of their strength and weapons.

these European colonisers was Ballet. (Grut, 1981) The Natal Province<sup>14</sup> had a strong British cultural ethos and hence European values and aesthetics were celebrated. Ballet had a robust following and the major city, Durban, boasted several Ballet Dance schools/studios in the 1950s and 60s.

Within the Speech and Drama course offered by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (formerly Natal University), a compulsory full-time Ballet course was included (Grut, 1981). With the advent of Democracy in 1994 and the transformation of the university to reflect a more African locality and spirit, this Ballet course fell away and new teachers and new forms of Dance came into the department.

Ballet is very much kept alive in Cape Town<sup>15</sup> as a Eurocentric form imposing a Western influence on all forms of Dance present in that region. For example, the Cape Town City Ballet company<sup>16</sup> is one of the very few companies in the country that performs and teaches Ballet at a high standard and it offers a repertoire of masterpieces such as *Giselle*, *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. The South African Ballet Theatre which also has a rich legacy, reflects in the main Eurocentric, thus white culture. As Triegaardt noted, whilst these companies are located in South Africa, their work largely reflected Ballet's traditional or Eurocentric repertoire. She said: "There were, however, isolated attempts across the years to access some aspect of South African culture" (Triegaardt, 2015:20). This comment of how a European art form should or could find an African identity is noteworthy as the same question can be asked about Bharathanatyam, an Indian art form that exists in South Africa.

During the Apartheid era, the arts - especially Dance, Theatre and music - was used by some political arts activists as a tool for advocating non-racialism and human rights, which it could

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<sup>14</sup> The province on the east coast of South Africa known today as KwaZulu-Natal, is centred on a natural protected bay. The bay was so named on Christmas Day (hence natal or birth [ of Christ]) by Portuguese (and Catholic) explorer, Vasco da Gama whilst on route to India to trade in spices. The city in the Natal province was named after a British official, D'Urban. Hence, we have the port city of Durban, located in the KwaZulu-Natal province today. The Zulu Kingdom and its peoples who also reside in this geographic space were finally acknowledged in the renaming of the province from Natal to KwaZulu-Natal following the first democratic elections and collapse of Apartheid in 1994. To further complicate matters Durban is also known as eThekweni which means ... in isiZulu. (Samuel, 2020) Indians arrive in their largest numbers during the slave migration from the late 1860s also known as 'indenture labour' (Desai, A., & Goolam H Vahed. 2007)

<sup>15</sup> Cape Town being the place where colonisation took root in South Africa is also the place where South African Ballet originated. This is also where the first Ballet companies were formed.

<sup>16</sup> CTCB is South Africa's oldest professional Ballet company.

be argued, conscientised the people of South Africa (black and white) to the issues of racial discrimination. Choreographer, curator and director, Jay Pather (2010) argued that “the South African government used Ballet in much the same way that Nazi Germany did. They took these really athletic forms; they made it the hallmark of rectitude; the ideal body” (Van Wyk in Friedman 2012:39). The performing arts was used as a tool by artists, choreographers and directors such as Vincent Mantsoe, Barney Simon, Gregory Maqoma, Athol Fugard and Welcome Msomi, to vent their anger and frustrations on stage and to win the support of people who were against all forms of racism. An example of such a work is Dada Masilo’s *Swan Lake* (Van Wyk in Friedman 2012). In this next section, I investigate the epistememes of Bharathanatyam in South Africa, tracing its history.

### **Planting the seeds for Indian Dance in South Africa**

According to Annamalai (1992 & 1998), Desai and Vahed. H. G (2007 & 2010), and Singh (2019), Indian Dance, as in one or other of the various Dance forms from India, arrived with the indentured labourers who landed in Durban, from the 1860s onwards. These migrants came to work on the sugarcane fields, coal mines and railways in the British colony of Natal.

The Indian settlers, migrants from a great variety of places (regional, urban and rural) within India, brought with them a range of village/folk and traditional Dance forms. Vasugi Singh<sup>17</sup> has claimed that this included the North Indian *Nautch* (a light lilted Dance style). Annamalai<sup>18</sup> researched the Indian Dance drama, *Therukoothu* which can be traced to the state of Tamil Nadu in India (Annamalai, 1998). Singh’s research also points to regular performances of *Therukoothu* at Mount Edgecombe which was one of the first sugar cane estates<sup>19</sup> owned by the British in the province of Natal.

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<sup>17</sup> Was among the early batch of Dancers from South Africa to India for further studies. She was awarded her Masters at UKZN in 2000 which traced the development of Bharathanatyam as a Socio-religious Dance form to theatrical Dance form in the context of South Africa.

<sup>18</sup> Annamalai is a veteran musician and Theatre academic in Durban, South Africa. He wrote a seminal thesis on *Therukoothu* for his MA at UKZN. *Therukoothu* Dance was based on religious literature and also comprised music and poetry.

<sup>19</sup> In some cases, small tracts of land (farms) were given to Indian labourers at the end of their contract. This over time led to an emergence from working class, of middle-class Indians in South Africa (ref. Samuel 2020 personal comment).

Since this traditional Dance form of *Therukoothu* is now extinct in South Africa, I made a point of attending a performance of this Dance drama at the Natyasastra Utsava festival hosted by Kalakshetra in Chennai on 2 December 2019. The theatrical style of this performance is widely recognised as using the totality of the performance space. The characters are dressed in exuberant costumes and use large skirts, their eyes are adorned with elaborate makeup and sometimes a large mask is worn. The performance comprises song and Dance that breaks into *Tamil* dialogue. The female characters were played by males. It must be noted that these men seemed well-trained in these roles as they walk, sway and even speak like a woman. Musicians are on stage supporting the Therukoothu work and also act as its chorus. I bemoaned the fact that such a rich art form which so easily lends itself to storytelling has disappeared from South African stages.

The type of Bharathanatyam that is practised in South Africa today can be traced from the 1940s. While Arundale's Kalakshetra began attaining international fame, South Africa was in the grip of Apartheid and became cut off from the rest of the world. The cultural boycotts led by the anti-Apartheid movement especially in the late 1960s and 1970s greatly limited cultural exchanges between artists from India and South Africa, including Indian Dancers and teachers during this period. Interestingly, it was during this era, relatively isolated from India (as Motherland) that Bharathanatyam began taking root in South Africa.

One of the first teachers of Bharathanatyam in South Africa was Ongra Devi Sharda Naidoo from Chennai, whose family had hailed from Hyderabad (Naidu, telephonic interview, 2021 January 24). Sharda Naidoo had a holistic schooling. She attended the Madras Seva Sadanam Boarding School in Chetput, in Chennai, India. Later, she married a Durban-based businessman, Jayraman Naidoo and travelled to South Africa in 1947/1948. Naidoo saw Indian Dance culture at its lowest on her arrival. She opened the first Indian Dance school in South Africa at the Hindu Tamil School in Durban in 1951 where she taught both *Telugu* (a South Indian language) and Bharathanatyam. Although she taught Dance, Naidoo did not perform on any stage in South Africa. This may explain why Naidoo is less well-known to young Indian

Dancers. Her students included Jayaluxmi Naidoo and Vis Poovalingam (daughter of Durban attorney and community activist, Pat Poovalingam).<sup>20</sup>



**Image 2: One of the first Bharathanatyam teachers in South Africa, Ongra Devi Sharda pictured here with her husband, Jayaraman Naidoo. The photograph which was taken in Chennai in the late 1940s was provided courtesy of Vijaya Naidu, daughter of Sharda Naidoo.**

Others who taught Bharathanatyam were Komala Moodley who had learnt a few pieces during a family visit to India around this time. Kanyakumari Moodley, the niece of Kesavaloo Goonam, (who was born in India) came to South Africa to teach local girls (Singh, 2019). Towards the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s, local Dancers went to India to further their studies in Dance. At that time very few Dance schools or stages existed for performances of Bharathanatyam. For a solid grounding in Bharathanatyam, most Dancers and teachers in SA felt that it was imperative that one visited India where the sources of many original teachers and schools were located. Life was difficult for the South African students studying in their Motherland as many could not speak the local *Tamil* language (English was not too popular in Madras in those days). The South African comforts such as electricity, clean water and hygienic

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<sup>20</sup> Sharda Naidoo ran her school for approximately 10 years. After her husband's death in 1961 she became a recluse and was not seen in the cultural scene. Naidoo passed away at age 91 in New Zealand. (Information provided by daughter Vijaya Naidu, telephonic conversation 20 January 2021).

ablution facilities were hard to come by. Many students left the luxury of their rising middle-class homes and endured such hardship for anything between one to four years. Many have attested to this that they endured this discomfort, in order to absorb as much as they could from traditional Bharathanatyam teachers and to take this knowledge and best practice to perform and teach in South Africa.

Bharathanatyam became a burgeoning Dance form for many middle and working-class Indians in the diaspora. The first batch of South African women who left to study in Chennai included Salochana Naidoo<sup>21</sup> who left in February 1959. Around the same time, the Nydoo sisters Rani and Prema<sup>22</sup> went to Madras to learn at the Saraswathi Gana Sabha.<sup>23</sup> Salochana, Rani and Prema were the first to learn a complete Bharathanatyam *margam* - a full repertoire of set Dance pieces. Jayalakshmi Naidoo, after initially taking lessons from Sharda Naidoo, further trained in Durban under Dr Thirupurasundrie<sup>24</sup> and later with Dr Padma Subramanyam<sup>25</sup> in Chennai. Kumari Ambigay<sup>26</sup> who travelled in 1966 spent four years learning Dance, Tamil language and music. Krish Swamivel Pillay,<sup>27</sup> a cousin of Ambigay, also studied Dance in Chennai for a brief period.

The next batch of teachers to train in India included of my own Guru, Yogambal Singaram<sup>28</sup> (nee Thambiran). Other young Dancers from KwaZulu-Natal included Vasugi Singh<sup>29</sup> (nee

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<sup>21</sup> Rich Indians took pride in ensuring their children were schooled in an art form. They could also afford travel and tuition fees. Salochana Naidoo hailed from the GV Naidoo family.

<sup>22</sup> Rani Nydoo has now passed away. Prema Nydoo is currently living in South India. Rani's daughter, Anusia Govender-Pillay carries the 60-year Dance legacy of her late mom and aunt with her Anavarata Dance Institute in Gauteng, SA. (Telephone conversation with Anusia on 19 January 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Built to propagate *Carnatic* music and Bharathanatyam in Andhra Pradesh, India. It is the oldest *Gana Sabha* in South India.

<sup>24</sup> Hails from Madras and was married to a Durban journalist/publisher of The Graphic, independent weekly newspaper.

<sup>25</sup> *Subramanyam* is an Indian classical Bharata Natyam Dancer. She is also a research scholar, choreographer, music composer, musician, teacher, Indologist and author based in Chennai.

<sup>26</sup> Ambigay's School of Dance still exists in Durban where she oversees folk and traditional Indian Dances.

<sup>27</sup> Pillay (now deceased) hailed from a family of dramatists, ran what is regarded as the largest Dance school in Durban (approximately 50 students graduated per year) teaching Indian folk, semi-classical and Bharathanatyam

<sup>28</sup> Yogambal Singaram's school the P and Y Kala Kendra is in its 42nd year of existence.

<sup>29</sup> Vasugi Singh's KZN Dance Theatre initiated institutionalized teaching through the then ML Sultan Technikon in the late 1970s.

Devar), Manormani Govender<sup>30</sup>(nee Moodley), Kantharuby Munsamy<sup>31</sup> (nee Govender), Vanitha Phillips,<sup>32</sup> Paranjyothi Naicker, Vyjayantimala Naidoo and Suriyakumari Govender (nee Naidoo). From the Cape Province, Savitri Naidoo (nee Gangen) travelled to India and learnt under Indra Rajen. All these Dancers returned in the 1970s and opened their own Dance schools in Indian townships, mostly in and around Durban, with the exception of Gangen who established a school in the predominantly-Indian township of Rylands, Cape Town. Among those who went to India in the second wave, the late 1970s and early 1980s, was Jayesper Moopen<sup>33</sup> who learnt at Kalakshetra in Chennai for five years and Maya Makanjee who also learnt Bharathanatyam but in Mumbai, then known as Bombay.

With the large number of India-trained Bharathanatyam Dance practitioners now returned to South Africa, there was little need for local students of Dance to go to India unless they were seeking extremely advanced training. Dance schools flourished in various towns and cities, especially where there was a high number of Indian residents. These places include Pietermaritzburg, Verulam, Tongaat, Stanger, Merebank, and Umzinto. In Durban, the sprawling Indian township that is Chatsworth<sup>34</sup>, and later too the Indian area that is Phoenix, saw many Indian Dance schools occupying space at temples and community halls.

What may be noteworthy is that in Cape Town in the 1960s, Heather Parker Lewis, a social worker who was not Indian and would have been defined as white, became fascinated with the Indian Dance form and its culture after hearing stories from her grandfather who had spent 10 years in India. Parker Lewis later watched an Indian film and was enthralled by the lively Dance scenes in the film. This triggered in her an abiding interest in Indian classical

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<sup>30</sup> Manormani Moodley learnt initially in Durban under her mother Dhanam Moodley before proceeding to India to learn from Indra Rajen. Dhanum learnt Indian Dance from watching Tamil cinema.

<sup>31</sup> Kantharuby Govender of Pietermaritzburg learnt under K. N Pakkriswamy Pillai and K.N Dhandayuthapani Pillai, at the K.N Dhandayuthapani Pillai Carnatic music college in Chennai. She still runs very active Dance schools in Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

<sup>32</sup> Vanitha Phillips is an elder cousin of Kantharuby. She learnt Dance from watching Indian movies and later on spent a short time at Saraswati Gana Sabha.

<sup>33</sup> Moopen runs a successful academy, Tribhangi Dance Theatre in Gauteng which she established in Johannesburg in 1989 She was one of the first to experiment with weaving traditional African Dance movements into her traditional Indian Dance.

<sup>34</sup> Chatsworth, south of Durban, is a bustling township developed by Durban Municipality after agrarian families were forcibly uprooted from their banana farms and market gardens 60 years ago (early 1960s) For from where, to where??. from e.g. from Springfield and Riverside to make way for industrialisation and white owned business (Samuel 2020). Today it is a vibrant neighbourhood comprising more than 500 000 people. The area continues to have a predominantly middle-class Indian population punctuated by pockets of extreme poverty and havens of wealth and affluence.

Dance. Typically, white women interested in Dance at that time would have studied Western Dance forms such as Ballet. Parker Lewis struggled to find an Indian Dance school as she was a white woman wanting to learn a Dance of another cultural group in the then racially-divided city of Cape Town in which there was a very small Indian community (Indians were not permitted to reside in certain provinces during Apartheid e.g., ironically the Orange 'Free' State). Parker Lewis comments that "[...] Apartheid legislation made it difficult for a mix of races to perform together on the stage ... the Apartheid government thought of every eventuality to keep people with different skin shades from walking one path" (2012:26). However, Parker Lewis came across Cynthia Wienand<sup>35</sup> who offered her private tuition in Indian Dance in Cape Town and then furthered her training with Savitri Naidoo at the age of 33.

It was only in the late 1970s that the North Indian classical Dance form, *Kathak*, made its way to the South African shores with Smeetha Maharaj.<sup>36</sup> Considerably, more research needs to be undertaken to trace a genealogy of *Kathak* in South Africa. Other highly respected teachers and performers of this Dance form include Vinod Hasal and Manesh Maharaj who have forged professional Dance careers in SA since the 2000s.

The proliferation of Indian Dance teachers also saw Bharathanatyam and *Kathak* making more frequent appearances on main stages. Typically, Indian Dance concerts based on stories from the Hindu epics *Ramayana*, *Mahabharatha* and the *Bhagavad Gita* were attended in temples, community halls and schools in Indian townships and importantly, initially by Indian audiences only. The bigger and better stages and performance venues such as the Playhouse Opera stage and Durban City Hall were located downtown in the cities and reserved for white performers only and with whites-only audiences. This segregationist practice remained throughout the Apartheid era and desegregated Dance audiences only became possible from the late 1980s. Indian culture was, therefore, severely compromised and undervalued. It was also underfunded, and poorly resourced in terms of education and performance spaces. And it

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<sup>35</sup>Wienand had undergone training in Cape Town with the famed Indian male Dancer Ram Gopal who is much praised by Arnold Haskell in his book *Baron Encore* (1952). Wienand who was white was also working contrary to societal norms. Haskell notes Gopal as the man who introduced Indian Dance to Western audiences. Like Rukmini Devi, Gopal had also received training under Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

<sup>36</sup> Smeetha Maharaj is founder director of Natেশwar Dance Academy and Chair of the South African Indian Dance Alliance.

was dimly promoted (in terms of marketing and advertising) by a central government in this country.

In summary, Indian Dance was severely marginalised under Apartheid because of the scant regard that was paid by the government of the day to the promotion of the Dance forms and other performing arts of the Indian community. Widespread ignorance of the performing arts and Indian culture in general must be read in the specific context of this research. Note, by comparison, there were five state-funded performing arts councils in South Africa and each one had a Ballet Dance company.<sup>37</sup> Indian Dance post-1994 stills remains on the margins, and this will be explored in the next section.

### **Indian Dance Post-1994**

When the cultural blockade against South Africa was lifted by India in September 1993, many local aspirant Bharathanatyam Dancers went for further tuition to India, thereafter returning to South Africa to open their own schools. They were valued by many Indian parents as more highly trained because they had been tutored in Chennai, despite the fact that some of these new teachers had spent only a few months being trained in a complex Dance form. This was essentially the first time that there was a large-scale import of Bharathanatyam. A globalisation of classical Indian Dance saw dozens of young South African women (and one or two men) going to India to learn different Dance forms such as Bharathanatyam and *Kathak*.

During the 1990s, the Indian High Commission in South Africa launched the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships which also paved the way for even more South African citizens, especially those of Indian heritage, to travel to India to further their interest in studies in Indian music and/or Dance (among other curricula). These short courses were often accredited by Indian universities. This made it possible for some of South Africa's leading Bharathanatyam Dancers (now the younger generation of teachers such as Verushka Pather, Yshrene Moodley, Nicolyn Dayanand, Niveshan Munsamy and Sarveshan Gangen) to study Dance in India. Verushka Pather learnt under the Dhananjayans who were themselves one of

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<sup>37</sup>The Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB), the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC), the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State (PACOFs), the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT) and the South West Africa Performing Arts Council (SWAPAC).

the first students of Rukmini Devi Arundale. Yshrene Moodley, a Kalakshetra graduate, followed in the footsteps of Jayesperi Moopen.

South African youth of Indian heritage today are confronted by, and have many Indian Dance choices - Bharathanatyam, *Kathak*, Bollywood<sup>38</sup> and folk Dances - and Western Dance forms such as Ballet, hip-hop, rock, pop and African traditional Dance. In the last 20 years, Bollywood has become one of the more popular Dance forms in South Africa with interest shown by many North Indian youth. South Indian folk and village Dances are also slowly becoming trendy amongst the younger generation who are bold enough to appear in annual regional and national *Tamil* eisteddfods. There are also a few Bollywood (North Indian) or Kollywood<sup>39</sup> (South Indian) variety concerts that have taken place at The Playhouse Company.<sup>40</sup> Some of these performances carried ticket prices ranging from R200 to R500, evidencing middle class tastes and values.

For a few years all seemed to be going well and serious critics would have given the teaching and learning of Bharathanatyam in South Africa a clean bill of health. A growing number of Dance schools opened, teaching mostly scores of young girls, but also some boys, Bharathanatyam. And then, *adavu*<sup>41</sup> by *adavu*, and *hasta*<sup>42</sup> by *hasta*, the wheels began coming off. What was happening in these spaces of Dance learning?

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<sup>38</sup> a name for the North Indian film industry.

<sup>39</sup> a name for the South-Indian film industry.

<sup>40</sup> Based in Durban, The Playhouse Company is an agency of the KZN department of Sports, Arts and Culture. Its mission is to produce, co-produce and present productions with artistic entertainment and educational value for diverse and ever-increasing audiences. Dance concerts are promoted and staged at the Playhouse provided that they draw sufficient audience interest and be financially viable. There has been a reduction in the number of Bharathanatyam performances at the Playhouse but this is not due to any restrictions placed by The Playhouse Company. Other Indian Dance forms such as Bollywood and *Gujarati* folk forms have been staged at to large audiences in recent years. Since there has been a decrease in followers of classical Bharathanatyam concerts, schools and organizations have stopped staging Bharathanatyam concerts at the Playhouse.

<sup>41</sup> Foundational steps a classical Dancer is taught which I will expand on later in this dissertation

<sup>42</sup> Hand gestures in classical Indian dancing.

## CHAPTER TWO – JATISWARAM

As both a researcher and a student of Bharathanatyam, I am left with many questions as to why no widespread use of a syllabus for this Dance form has been designed by teachers in South Africa since the late 1950s. There appears to be a lack of urgency by those involved in Bharathanatyam to investigate what could be missing in the vocabulary or semiotics and the latest developments in Bharathanatyam, nor how these omissions might be rectified.<sup>43</sup>

This chapter unpacks a discourse of pedagogy and looks briefly at a history of the notion of teaching itself. It will begin by expanding on the different types of Dance pedagogy in the Western world and discusses related theories including: embodied- curriculum (Stinson 2016, 2005, 1999), context of culture (Warburton 2019 & Shapiro 2004), child-centered and independent learning approaches (Friedman, 2011), holistic development through Dance (Loots, 2006) and children as co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 1968). It goes on to discuss decolonization, Apartheid, the dawn of the new Democracy and inclusivity in order to situate the changes in education, specifically Dance education, in South Africa. The White Paper for the arts and its impact on the creative and performing arts in South Africa is observed. Explored next are some of the Dance teaching methods adopted in India, such as the *Guru-shishya* system according to (Kothari, 2007; Banerjee, 2013; Ghosh, 1951 and Pillai, 2002). This section will also focus on the role of teachers: *Gurus*, facilitators and others and goes on to look at the nature of past teaching of Bharathanatyam compared to current methods that are practised both in South Africa and India. The chapter comments on the nature of Dance Teaching both in a South African context and Indian contexts and ends with challenges that come along with being both a practitioner and teacher of Dance. This then begs the question, how is Bharathanatyam being taught and adhered to (or not) in South Africa and by whom?

### Locating Pedagogies of Bharathanatyam

Dance may be seen to be a language used to evoke, unpack or perform abstract ideas, that has been explored since the turn of the century by modern Dance pioneers including Mary Wigman, Doris Humphrey, Rudolf Van Laban, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham (Mazo,

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<sup>43</sup> Specifically looking at the delivery of the sequence of the content which seems to be the model that Dance teachers follow in South Africa.

1977). Laban saw Dance as a creative movement that has the ability for change - life change. He had an impulse towards Dance as he saw it as a tool for life-learning, a tool for education and also a form of therapy. Laban had explored extensively the ideas of natural and pedestrian movement and a greater variety of bodies who Dance. He was considered a forerunner of *Ausdruckstanz*. Laban used large-scale movement choirs to explore his ground-breaking ideas. He formed his principles through observation of movement in varying situations such as workplace and factories and not specifically Dancers and the Dance studios (Hodgson, J & Preston Dunlop, V. 1990)

The aim of Dance in Education is achieving a balance between knowing the process of creating, performing and viewing Dances on one hand, and an appreciation of the art form on the other. In order to locate the pedagogy of Bharathanatyam as a Dance form, and cultural expression, this section will broadly investigate pedagogies in Dance. It recognizes that such pedagogies emanate mostly from the West. It is noteworthy that in Bharathanatyam, improvisation is central to a performative act which is also predominantly a solo art form. Bharathanatyam Dancers are expected to drive the performance forward in conversation with their live musicians who Arundale had placed on the side of the same stage as the Dancer. It could be argued then, that Bharathanatyam by its very nature is processual rather than a performance of a predetermined set of steps. Warburton observes that:

Indigenous Dance practices, on the other hand, are often transmitted in a traditional command style, where Dancers reproduce a specific set of outcomes on cue. The teacher makes the decisions. There is a direct and immediate relationship between the teacher's stimulus and the learner's response (Warburton, 2019:86-87).

What I have observed is that Bharathanatyam whilst indigenous to *Tamils* of South India and passed down through a strict and commanding style of instruction, is nevertheless supported by individual improvisatory expression. Given its very nature as a creative, entertaining art form, Bharathanatyam pedagogy will fall within the category of liberation education (discussed hereafter) where the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the pupils is infused with individual personality and creativity.

Pedagogy may be defined as a method of teaching or system of learning which is theoretically constructed according to Edward C. Warburton (2019), Lev Vygotsky (1980), John Dewey (1998) and others. According to Lakhwinder Kaur:

Pedagogy refers more broadly to the theory and practice of education, and how this influences the growth of learners. Pedagogy, taken as an academic discipline, is the study of how knowledge and skills are exchanged in an educational context, and it considers the interactions that take place during learning. Education may be defined as a purposive, conscious process which leads to development of individual, society and world as a whole (Kaur in Jaamour 2019).

What Kaur's comment reminds us is that Dance teachers also need to be aware that their transfer of knowledge shapes the child's processes of development. In some sense this requires all teachers to be consciously aware of their role and power. This issue will be expanded in later sections.

Importance has to be placed on pedagogic approach, and I maintain that specifically in Dance pedagogy, we need to urgently investigate the modes of delivery in Bharathanatyam in South Africa. The connection between the teaching of the physical form and gender in our classrooms is what bell hooks in Florence (1998) refers to as 'engaged pedagogy'. This mode of teaching aims to recognise the specific context in which the teaching is unfolding and the impact of the two-way relationship between teacher and child. This can be extended to pedagogies in Bharathanatyam. I suggest that the teacher-child relationship in Bharathanatyam can also be investigated through hooks' lens. Dance education professor Warburton has mentioned that:

Pedagogical practice may be shaped by administrative policy, assessment practices, classroom management strategies, curricular specialists and the like, but it focuses first and foremost on the art and science of instruction. The theory and practice of education writ large informs teaching practices (pedagogy) that also must grapple with the specific cognitions, cultures, histories and technologies of the domain under study (contents) (2019:82).

Dance in education, according to Dance educator and author Jacqueline Smith-Autard, is the "process of dancing and its affective/experiential contribution to the participant's overall development as a moving/feeling being" (1997:4). In her book – *The Art of Dance in Education* (1997) offers a theoretical and practical framework for the teaching of Dance in Education. She balances two different approaches to arrive at a single point and can be likened to a long sliding scale. Smith-Artaud<sup>44</sup> looked at how we develop Dancers for performance suggesting that they require technical forms of physical training as well as creative Dance-making. Her

concept of the Midway model<sup>45</sup> is one example of how teaching should always be dynamic and constantly engaging. The Midway model aims at creating, performing and appreciating Dance. However, the Midway model did not emphasise process or product in the way previous models such as improvisation had advocated. Her model allows for students to move forward and develop the crucial analytical skills needed to become professional Dancers.

A worthwhile case study in Dance in Education is discussed in the documentary; *Rhythm Is It...*<sup>46</sup> led by choreographer and Dance in education theorist, Royston Maldoom. In this example, Maldoom worked with 250 teenagers in Berlin. Maldoom has also worked in Ethiopia and in South Africa in the dying years of Apartheid. Maldoom in the documentary makes mention that he was not really interested in the Dance but rather in the process of education for the young people involved. This can be interpreted as an interest in what Dance can make possible for all people to understand, underscoring the notion that Dance is a highly effective medium. Maldoom's focus was on the performance as an outcome of learning by the teenagers. The 250 children in his project were able to learn Dance amongst other important life-learning tools, and values such as discipline. (*Rhythm is it ...* 2012).

Sherry B. Shapiro advocates to Dance teachers to be compassionate to the contextual frameworks of their students that are influenced by the content of that which they wish to teach. She maintained that in Dance education there needs to be an understanding of "where students come to make sense of their lives as they come to an awareness of the dialectical relationship between their subjectivity and the dominant values that shape their lives" (2004:16).

Young children as students are embedded in different cultures and these differences need to be valued to certain degree. As Stinson notes, "it is important to recognize children have a different system for understanding than do adults, and they think differently" (1985:15). Whereas the child/learner-centred method of teaching places the child/learner in a non-hierarchal role. Furthermore, Friedman unpacks the hierarchal roles in teaching. She states that such a model of education, "seeks to empower the learner by dismantling traditional

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<sup>46</sup> *Rhythm Is It!* is a 2012 German documentary film looking at Dance in education directed by Royston Maldoom.

power relationships in the classroom and honour student bodies, curiosities, and knowledges in constructing new knowledge” (2011:31).

In Paulo Freire’s, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,<sup>47</sup> he introduces the concept of ‘liberation education’ which looks at rejecting the banking system<sup>48</sup> in the education process. Liberation education in relation to Dance in education works on a similar principle i.e., the idea of co-creation of knowledge between the teacher and Dance student in the act of teaching and learning. This is most visible in the relationship between a choreographer and student where the Dancer is often an inspiration to the choreographer. Liberation aims towards humanisation so that both men and women become conscious through acts of cognition and in the process resolve the ‘all-knowing’ teacher versus the vacuous and impoverished student contradiction. The traditional teacher-student relationship in Bharathanatyam could be aligned to the banking system that is rejected by Freire. Should the banking system of Bharathanatyam be rejected as it may result in children not having their own individuality/their own person?

Durban-based choreographer Liane Loots values a Dance education programme located in South Africa that is “not only about a well-pointed foot and a well- executed contraction but about this agenda of ‘growing people’” (2006:296). This is similar to Freire’s thinking.

bell hooks also looked at the concept of the ‘transgressive education’ in which the notion of breaking the stereotypical role of a submissive teacher who is female is problematised. Students should become active participants rather than passive consumers. This approach values students’ expression and does not seek to limit them as docile/passive students. It is an attempt at making the education of students a self-driven activity that is engaging critically and within complex environments. (Florence, 1998)

With these ideas as a central guide, Bharathanatyam teachers would also need to take into consideration that education itself is located in a specific culture; children differ from adults; the hierarchal roles in teaching; and the notion of children being empty vessels. Such a broad

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<sup>47</sup> Pedagogy of the Oppressed written by Paulo Freire, the system of learning is presented with an alternative concept of ‘liberation education.

<sup>48</sup> focuses on depositing and transferral of information that are dehumanizing and that alienated the student’s perception of the world.

investigation includes reflecting on Dancers as developing beings; Dancers from contextual frames and Dancers not being passive.

In this scenario, pedagogy is seen both as a type of delivery of knowledge and its consumption. Educational theorist, Lee Shulman, argues that good teachers should create meaningful comprehensive content for their students. He said teachers should use: “the most powerful analogues, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations - in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (Shulman,1986:9). Similarly, Dance teachers need to facilitate understanding that is much more than just movement of the limbs. This is certainly the case in Bharathanatyam where the aim of dancing is the marriage of mind, body and soul. As Dance Professor Sue Stinson (2016) in (Warburton, 2019) reminds us, teaching of Dance has the “potential to advance such embodied understandings, creative expressions and cultural competencies for learner and teacher alike that motivate the field of Dance education” (Warburton, 2019:83). This could equally apply to the pedagogy of Bharathanatyam.

In the next section, I will comment on the differences between Pedagogy in South Africa and India and the tensions that exist in the pedagogy of Bharathanatyam in both these socio-cultural spaces.

### **Dance pedagogy in South Africa**

In this section I will discuss decolonization; Apartheid; the dawn of the new Democracy; inclusivity in order to situate the changes in education, specifically Dance education in South Africa; and briefly comment on the White Paper for the arts and its impact on the creative and performing arts in South Africa.

The main auditorium at Wits University was filled to capacity one Thursday evening in March 2017. The audience applauded long and loudly when Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who is widely revered as the founding father of the decolonialisation discourse, said in a lecture titled 'Secure the Base, Decolonise the Mind': "African languages are not on a lower rung on a ladder to an English heaven ... use English ... but don't let English use you. If you know all the languages of the world but not your mother tongue, that is enslavement. Knowing your mother tongue and all other languages too is empowerment" (Nihss.ac.za, 2017). He went on

to explain that to understand the world and Africa's place in it, "we must understand ourselves" first. It is in line with wa Thiong'o's strong argument for the crucial role of African languages in "the resurrection of African memory", that this next section will explore how contemporary Indian Dance is contributing to the decolonising agenda and to notions of Multiculturalism. (Nihss.ac.za, 2017). I will also comment on the nature of what I have termed intergenerational teaching and oral traditions.

In an effort to problematise the colonised mind, wa Thiong'o in his book, 'Decolonising the Mind', (1986) unpacks notions of cultural identity and the reality that the term 'race' did not end with Apartheid. Coming from centuries of oppression, post-Apartheid South Africa even in 2021, carries with its progress and hope for greater inclusion and human rights, hundreds of years of indenture, colonised mind-sets and the scars of racial oppression and bigotry. The abandoning of mother tongue languages leads to further questions around what role language plays in the importance and sustenance of culture. In this sense, I am also considering Indian Dance as a trampled upon and silenced language. However, wa Thiong'o mentioned that:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves and affects how they look at their culture, at their places, politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world (Wa Thiong'o, N. 1986:16).

English has become first language to a large majority of black and white South Africans. At both my primary and secondary school we were taught in English, as it was considered a "powerful language", positioning any other languages including *isiZulu* and *Tamil* as inferior. Disregarding language may be said to be tantamount to disrespecting another culture. A clear example of disrespecting language took place when a transforming University of KZN removed Indian languages such *Tamil*, *Hindi*, *Telegu*, *Sanskrit* and *Hindu* and Arabic studies from their academic programmes/curriculum from the year 2000 onwards.

After a lengthy battle by community and cultural leaders led by retired inspector of education Mr Pi Devan, the education authorities introduced Indian languages from primary school to matric level in 1984. After enjoying a few years of inclusion in the primary and secondary

school curricula, Indian languages were accorded pariah<sup>49</sup> status by the department of education in a democratic South Africa. Students who wished to study Indian languages in school had to do so after school hours. This is the current state of affairs. wa Thing'o urges that we find ways to bring mother tongues back. Franz Fanon speaks of the White hegemonic position held in society in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). He cautioned that: "

Every colonized people, in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality, finds itself face-to-face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (Fanon, 1967:18).

In South Africa, black people who forsake their Africanness and mother tongue for western influences are termed 'Coconuts' or 'Oreo'. In other words, while they are dark-skinned, they have an inner yearning for whiteness. This is a racist, offensive slur but, reflects the problem when there are clashes of cultures.

Contemporary Dance in South Africa, may contribute to the decolonising agenda as it is Dance form that does not work exclusively with the narrative but rather with the body as its language to tell stories through abstractions of emotion or feelings (Loots, 2006). Some contemporary Dancers in studios such as the Flatfoot Dance Company often work through writing personal stories on the body and these stories become the impulse for choreography that is layered and fractured. Thus, the choreography could be both vulnerable and intimate and also extrovert and public, covering all emotions and dynamics. Contemporary Dance in South Africa has been used as a platform for people to voice their concerns through Dance.

The National Arts Festival held in Makanda (previously Grahamstown) has for 47 years provided a platform across the creative arts for everyone to express themselves. Friedman noted that, "from the outset [it] mounted works that are both politically contentious and often "multiracial" (2012:2). African themes have since the 1980s become increasingly commonplace in the works of South African choreographers. They are interrogating African issues closer to home rather than exploring European themes. A change in mind-set needs to take place on a greater scale - creating an African identity - rather than being on par with the movements in other countries which do not truly reflect Africanness. If it wants to be truly

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<sup>49</sup> The etymology of the word Pariah derives from the low caste Pariyars of Tamil Nadu

reflective of South African arts, then the National Arts Festival must feature the artistic persuasions of all the people, and this would include Dance forms other than African, such as Bharathanatyam.

Kipling-Brown cautioned that “Our knowledge of Dance and our expression in Dance today have emerged from the local and global transitions of the past” (Kipling-Brown in Shapiro, 2008:151). There is need for a major drive from both black and white South Africans to free the mindset, to decolonise the brain from years of oppression and subjugation, and to begin reflecting on ourselves instead to see how important and beautiful we are as a nation. However, whilst we celebrate Africa in our cultural pursuits, we must not lose sight of the rest of the world for after all, we are part of one human nation. There needs to be balance between showcasing what is African and that which is global. There is no place for anything to remain exclusively African or traditional whilst the world has transformed into a global village. Since Democracy, South Africa has again joined the international community and must, therefore, assimilate global artistic influences.

Decolonising must provide for the inclusion of all types from society.

This is particularly important to people not used to seeing themselves reflected in the mirror of conventional learning - whether women, gay people, disabled people, the working classes or ethnic minorities. Knowledge and culture are collectively produced and these groups, which intersect in different ways, have as much right as elite white men to understand what their own role has been in forging artistic and intellectual achievements (Gopal, 2017).

Decolonising must not discriminate. Koch (2016) and Samuel (2016) have noted that people living with disabilities must not be excluded from education, including Dance education. In 2001, the Department of Education issued a policy document called White Paper 6: Special Needs Education,<sup>50</sup> Building an Inclusive Education and Training System. The document was a response to the post-Apartheid state of special needs and support services in education and training. Two main findings were that only a small percentage of learners with disabilities were receiving specialised education and support, usually on a racial basis, and that the education system had generally failed to provide services appropriate to the diverse needs of learners.

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<sup>50</sup> The document was in response to the post-Apartheid state of special needs and support services in education and learning. Available: <https://wcedonline.westerncape.gov.za/Specialised-ed/documents/WP6.pdf>.

For most learners with disabilities, this meant they were 'mainstreamed by default' or that they did not attend school at all. The number of children with disabilities out of school at that time was estimated at 280 000. To address these problems, it was recommended that the system be changed to an inclusive one where all learners can access education and training no matter what their individual needs are. This change would permit all children, including children with disabilities, to "develop and extend their potential and participate as equal members of society" (DOE, White Paper 6, 2001). While, much emphasis is placed on providing for the disabled within the education system, provisions should also be made for varying art forms, such as Bharathanatyam.

According to Sisonke Msimang:

Radical departures from the status quo are never easy. They are always simultaneously symbolic and visceral. But they open up new possibilities for questioning what was once unquestioned and unquestionable (2015).

The demand by students for free education (discussed earlier) reminds us of the need for radical change. The protests attempted to challenge the African struggle that is at the centre of a larger contemporary African struggle that seeks to engage the power dynamics existing in race, class, disability and gender and sexuality oppressions. Bharathanatyam is excluded from mainstream curricula in schools and universities in South Africa. Part of this process of decolonising the curriculum should therefore include the acceptance of Bharathanatyam and other Indian Dances as part of the Dance curriculum of the future if we are to arouse the minds of all with respect to past colonial practices and injustices

In terms of Dance, under Apartheid there was little to no interaction, collaboration and exchange between African, European and Asian traditions.

Friedman wrote that an Anti-Apartheid movement and struggle for freedom grew stronger in the late 1980's, the stage began to be used more frequently as a protest platform (2012:5). Events such as the Sharpeville massacre,<sup>51</sup> the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and the 1976 Soweto Uprising<sup>52</sup> as well as more recent events inspired critical arts and created a sense of

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<sup>51</sup> The Sharpeville massacre took place on 21 March 1960, at a police station in the township of Sharpeville in the Transvaal.

<sup>52</sup> Demonstrations and protest by school children against what was going on in the country at the time

community for people who used the arts' platform to express a political voice, one that could engage with the painful experiences in the country.

During the Apartheid years, the Creative and Performing arts (including Dance, Theatre and music) promoted the Struggle against racism, injustice and inequality, and when Democracy was attained, many aspects of the performing arts such as Indian Dance shifted their focus from being a form of protest where they used fusion elements and included black Dancers and Struggle songs and lyrics, to become a form of entertainment.

During the Struggle against institutionalised racism in South Africa, there was much debate about the role of the arts and education in advancing the liberation agenda. The debate ranged from the arts being used:

as a weapon of the struggle, to the establishment of community art centres as the building blocks of a new people-centred non-racial cultural practise, the democratisation and transformation of establishment spaces to the debate about looking at art as more than a space for political expression (South African History Online, 2011).

With the dawn of Democracy in 1994, the discourse around Democracy and human rights was revised. This led to the birth of the Constitution which allowed for greater freedom for the people. Since the inception of Democracy, the state's priorities have shifted to an emphasis on funding to make up for the critical backlog in housing, health services and education thus funding for the arts does not enjoy priority funding. The many multicultural communities in a diverse country such as South Africa have also become all the poorer through reduced funding for art. Apart from recreational values, the performing arts has the potential to develop critical thinking in its audiences.

With regards to the education sector in post 1994 South Africa, there remains much inequality in staffing infrastructure, resources and facilities as mentioned earlier. Curriculum 2005<sup>53</sup> was designed to create a system that was person-centred and would be accessible to everyone. The aim was for all South Africans to develop into active, creative and critical thinkers. It focused on moving from a content-based approach to an Outcomes Based approach (De Waal,

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<sup>53</sup> Wasa framework that was set up to address issues such as access, development and equity of education in a South African context. There is no reference for this document as it could not be found.

2004). However, Curriculum 2005 failed for many reasons including a lack of appropriate resources and an inability to upskill less-qualified teachers.

In keeping with the ethos of a new democratic South Africa, The White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage (DAC, 1996)<sup>54</sup> endeavoured to present arts and culture for all people, young and old and in all communities, “to give creative expression to the diversity of our heritage and the promise of the future” (DAC, 1996).

The White Paper (DAC, 1996) enforced the ‘Arms-length’ policy which meant that no one could intervene in the rights of an individual to choose his or her artistic preferences. The social governance system that went hand-in-hand with this policy was the politics of liberal Democracy that focused on the rights of an individual, but this only worked if every individual occupied the same economic status. The White Paper also used the arts as a tool for reconciliation. The government decided that “arts and culture may play a healing role through promoting reconciliation” (DAC, 1996). The purpose of the White Paper (1996) was to establish, “the optimum funding arrangements and institutional frameworks for the creation, promotion and protection of South African arts, culture, heritage and the associated practitioner” (DAC, 1996). The policy proposal inscribed in the White Paper (1996) was a development of the cultural industries strategy and later integrated into the Mzansi Golden Economy (MGE) programme. The Government introduced the MGE strategy to reposition the cultural industries in South Africa. The MGE strategy cleared the way for the arts, culture and heritage sectors to effectively and comprehensively contribute to economic growth and job creation. The Minister of Arts and Culture declared 2013 as the year of MGE to reposition arts, culture and heritage as an economic growth sector, and to introduce programmes that would contribute to employment. However, the MGE strategy faced a number of challenges that prevented Government from reaching its intended targets for economic growth and job creation:

the sector was not seen as a priority for career choices, as it was perceived that it would not offer as good salaries or stability as the traditional professions, and many young people

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<sup>54</sup> 42 The South African White Paper for Arts, culture and heritage (1996) was published by the department of Arts in Culture in June 1996 and was adopted by the cabinet in August that same year. It is available on: <http://www.dac.gov.za/content/white-paper-arts-culture-and-heritage->.

had not had the opportunity to have their talent identified or developed at school level (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2011)

It was not long before the performing arts became a commercial venture. Artists became businessmen, for example, Mbongeni Ngema the well-known musician and actor became director of Committed Artists which produced *Sarafina* in the 1990s. All haste was made in the bid for government funding available through the new cultural institutions.<sup>55</sup> Corruption became commonplace as millions of rands were siphoned from State coffers under the guise of promoting arts. Reports of how funds went into pockets or were used to window-dress events such as the opening of a soccer match or conference were rife.<sup>56</sup> These reports of corruption and maladministration contributed to a decrease in the number of serious art promoters and arts enthusiasts. Like other Dance forms, Bharathanatyam in South Africa also suffered to a certain extent, due to the misuse of funding for the promotion of the art. The importance, or rather the lack of it, that Government accords the creative arts was clear during the COVID-19 pandemic when funding for the performing arts became a challenge. There were no productions, owing to lockdowns and artists were left to fend for themselves without any form of steady income.

It could be argued that the creative arts are supposed to be a service to society. (DAC, 1996) However, the serious artist is under threat. An artist has the ability to analyse, expose and challenge the hidden social, cultural and political processes that are a part of knowledge production, including the manner in which individual views and assumptions are based in a particular cultural and historical context. The lack of funding for creative arts can result in fewer artists. Consequently, fewer artists are available to recognise potential injustices to specific art forms and few are willing to take action to transform the practices and structures that perpetuate them.

Professor in Dance education Ann Kipling-Brown has stated that:

As teachers, Dancers, choreographers, researchers, historians, citizens, or players of whatever role we undertake that has a part in the enterprise of education, we must ask ourselves what we teach and why [education] becomes a place of greater justice and dignity for all (Kipling Brown, 2008:155-156).

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<sup>56</sup> As issued by the office of public protector in 1996. Read more:  
<https://www.gov.za/documents/investigation-concerning-sarafina-ii-donor-public-protector-report#>

Education is an important role-player in the politics of inclusivity and has become a major issue in contemporary South Africa. Kipling-Brown (2008) reminds us that multiple role players are required to give effect to justice and dignity.

South Africa has seen decades of institutionalised racism where people have been denied experiences of equality; yet it is education more than anything else, that can help achieve equality. Presently, South Africa has an unemployment rate of 32,6% (SA Stats) unemployment rate. Education can help people to find employment, become economically emancipated, enabled for a better understanding of the world and prepared to have a deeper appreciation of arts and culture.

According to Whatley (2007), inclusivity is the act of allowing access, acceptance or privilege to people who may be excluded on the grounds of gender, race, class or disability. This is the view is shared by disability arts choreo-activist Jurg Koch:

I feel very privileged to have had access to Dance, to have had this experience and to be able to continue to pursue Dance as a profession. This access to experience your body as something of value, as something with skill and artistic possibilities, this access to Dance, is not available to all people, particularly people with disabilities, but other groups as well, are often excluded, discouraged by inaccessible studios, inaccessible teaching processes and a lack of artistic vision (2016:1).

Leading up to Koch's writing in 2016, disabled Dancers were slowly being accepted for who they are and being given opportunities to express themselves in and through Dance. Change in Dance education in South Africa in terms of inclusion and the disabled is taking place according to Samuel (2012, 2015, 2016). He wrote, "for many, the question of how to achieve a non-judgemental attitude to such layered difference like disability remains" (2015: 121).

The Revised 2017 draft White Paper for arts, culture and heritage had aimed to continue building a new and inclusive society to which the arts, culture and heritage have contributed, but went further to address new challenges and opportunities that have risen. The key element of the revised 2017 Draft White Paper was to establish an integrated national dispensation of arts, culture and heritage. Its main focus was on social cohesion and nation building. In light of a new South Africa, a "modern South African society can be characterised as being multicultural" (Le Roux, 2010:19). Post- Apartheid the situation improved with a fusion in the arts between Indian, African and Western Dance forms increasing. The 1996 White Paper had aimed for a greater exchange of traditions under the democratic arts and

culture dispensation. The revised 2017 White Paper placed more weight on the promotion of African Dance forms and the provision of incentives for collaborations between African,<sup>57</sup> Asian<sup>58</sup> and Western<sup>59</sup> Dance. Friedman has mentioned that, “the post-Apartheid Dance studies curriculum was conceived in an attempt to serve the purpose of redress and provide a more balanced appreciation of our multicultural heritage” (2012:11).

The latest offering from the Basic Education department– “allows for the monitoring of progress against measurable indicators covering all aspects of basic education including enrolments and retention of learners, teachers, school-funding etc.” (DBE, 2014). They have proposed Schooling 2025<sup>60</sup> which aims to make sure that every young South African receives quality schooling in keeping with the country’s new Constitution.

Both the 1996 and 2017 White Papers made fleeting references to secondary and tertiary education being harnessed for the promotion of the performing arts. The 2017 White Paper should have more strongly emphasised the importance of schools and universities as platforms to develop, nurture and promote the performing arts and its appreciation so that more students would have been exposed to the performing arts. Rather than music, Theatre and Dance being subjects of choice at secondary school level, it should be made compulsory for one of these forms to be studied as part of the National Senior Certificate curriculum. The same should apply at tertiary level where every faculty should make it mandatory for music, Dance or Theatre to be included for study as a compulsory module/course that can be credited as part of your degree/diploma course. Such a radical move might ensure that an interest, love and appreciation of music, Dance and Theatre is inculcated in young men and women from an early age and this will hopefully be sustained later in life.

At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Honours Dance in Education module headed by Dr Liane Loots includes sections such as disability in Dance, technical skills training, critical Dance theory and community-based teaching praxis. Dance curricula at various South African universities such as Rhodes, Wits and Unizulu vary greatly. For example: Rhodes emphasises physical Theatre and Unizulu traditional African (Zulu) Dance. None of these universities to

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<sup>57</sup> African Dance such as *Indlamu* and *Pantsula*.

<sup>58</sup> Asian Dance such as *Bharathanatyam*, *Kathak* and *Kathakali*.

<sup>59</sup> Western Dance such as Ballet.

<sup>60</sup> Action plan by government to improve basic education in schools.

date has a full-time study of Bharathanatyam. In 2009, the University of Cape Town had a short module in Indian Dance studies run by Savitri Naidoo within its Performance Studies course.

The energy and enthusiasm of youth for change, especially in relation to legacies that are deeply rooted in the racist past, must not be under-estimated. We know only too well how the #feesmustfall campaign brought universities to a standstill throughout South Africa in 2016. Although the eruption of campus violence resulted in students being injured, their leaders being arrested and damage to infrastructure running into tens of millions of rands, the message from young men and women was clear: we want change, we want it now! So seriously was this warning heeded by the government that it resulted in the breakthrough announcement in December 2017 of free tertiary education for deserving students. Thus, the authorities should realize the need to include classes that were excluded under Apartheid or it could well happen that angry youth may compel them to do so.

Most South African universities enjoy state-of-the-art Theatre facilities which are sadly neglected and are allowed to go to ruin owing to university financial constraints. An example is the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Square Space Theatre. The Department of Arts and Culture should consider subsidising the upkeep of such facilities so that these facilities become focal points for the cultural enrichment of the diverse communities surrounding them. In my view, the "Cinderella status" that is accorded to the performing arts departments at universities must come to an end. The Dance, music and Theatre departments must be given greater importance within the university mainstream curriculum. The proposed policy change will have a profound impact on the future trajectory of the performing arts and its contribution to a just and inclusive society by drawing on the creative juices of all people. Rather than closing their doors each afternoon, such spaces noted above, should become vibrant and creative for the development and nurturing of young and old through Dance, music and Theatre. Consideration should also be given to offering bursaries to all those who wish to study the performing arts at a postgraduate level.

Students should be able to articulate their interests and be included instead of excluded from the process of their learning. While creative arts features in the school curricula, it is not necessarily promoted with vigour. It would seem that in the teaching of Indian Dance in South

Africa, students are far too passive, and teachers are not developing critical young artists which will need further investigation.

## **Dance Pedagogy in India**

Prior to looking at the teaching and learning of Bharathanatyam in South Africa, it is useful to look at the teaching practices of teachers of Bharathanatyam in its birthplace in India. The subject of Bharathanatyam as form and spiritual practice has been discussed in chapter 1. The heartbeat of Bharathanatyam is its link to God. (Kalakshetra, 2019) Every facet of this Dance form, from the movements and the music to the messages portrayed, is embedded in spirituality and devotion to a Higher Power. Elevating Dance to Godhead, Rukmini Devi Arundale says:

Art is in reality a reflection of man's soul which in itself is part of nature. That visible God which we call nature is essential to stir the invisible God within. It is only when this invisible God is awake that it is possible not only to create works of art but even to see. Thus, 'seeing rightly' is as much an expression of creative genius as when an artist who is a master of technique, produces something of permanent value (Kalakshetra, 2019)

Arundale's husband, George Arundale who entertained many ideas on education, believed in the connection and trust a teacher and pupil should share:

if education were for living and not merely for livelihood; if education were for joy and happiness and not merely for temporal success; if education were for self-expression and not so exclusively for imitation ... then (only) would the younger generation be well-equipped for life (Samson, 2010:52).

Education must be more than a means to an end. It must prepare you for life. Education must be value-based.

Banerjee maintained that "Bharathanatyam, as a cultural, historical and religious form of Dance was perpetuated through Guru-shishya (teacher- student) method, both in India and abroad" (Banerjee, 2013:20). Given the religious associations around Bharathanatyam, even the teachers of the Dance form were regarded as sacrosanct. The pedagogy for Bharathanatyam in India defined expectations for a teaching and learning behaviour to set up the manner of interpersonal communications. The *Guru* or teacher is supposed to be supreme, must be always obeyed and never challenged or disrespected. Historically, most *Gurus* were

located in Chennai which has been the hub of Bharathanatyam training since the times of the great masters who arrived in the city in the 1930s. *Gurus* passed on their knowledge to the new class of aspiring Dancers. Before long, these Dancers in turn became teachers to meet the ever-growing demand for learning the art.

Kothari has discussed: “The *Guru-Shishya-Parampara*. The tradition of the teachers and disciples, in India dates back to the times of the Vedas. Thanks to the devotion and dedication of some of the great guru, the art of Bharatanatyam has been saved from oblivion in the present century” (2007:144) The pedagogy of Bharathanatyam is premised on the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*. The *Guru-Shishya-Parampara* meant that the *Guru* (teacher) would impart his/her knowledge to *Shishyas* (students) selflessly and unconditionally without any expectations other than that their student should gain as much knowledge as they could. The *Guru-shisya* relationship was based on the total commitment of the *Guru* to impart knowledge, and the respect, commitment, devotion, and obedience of the student, which is considered to be the ideal way for subtle or advanced knowledge to be transmitted. Eventually, the student masters the knowledge that the *Guru* embodies.

The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* grew under the *Gurukulam* or *Gurukulavasam* system. A student would be sent by his or her parents to live with the *Guru*. They would have to clean and cook for their *Guru* and learn from morning till night, the learning ceasing only when you went to bed. At the end of the teaching journey, when the *Shishya* is now ready for the *arangetram*<sup>61</sup>, the *Guru* would receive ‘*Gurudakshina*’ - a token of appreciation or gratitude from the *Shishya*. This would be a cloth or shawl or even a basket of fruit. Sadly, the system is open to abuse - some students are regarded as cheap household labour, and there is also the expectation of exorbitantly priced gifts in the form of jewellery and gilded saris is acknowledged. This is the off-shoot materialism blinding the *Bhakti* in Bharathanatyam.

*Guru-Shishya Parampara* allowed for students to not only learn the art form but also for the holistic development of life skills pertaining to social manners and etiquette and allowed for the psychological transitions that are necessary when living away from your family and adjusting to staying with someone who is your elder but not your parents. The adolescent and

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<sup>61</sup> The arangetram is the debut public solo performance

vulnerable student had to quickly learn how to deal with the *Guru's* mood swings and temperament and any abuse of power relationship into which they may be locked.

Meador suggests that: "A bad teacher can set a student or group of students back considerably. They can create significant learning gaps, making the next teacher's job that much harder. A bad teacher can foster an atmosphere full of discipline issues and chaos, establishing a pattern that is extremely difficult to break. Finally, and perhaps most devastatingly, they can shatter a student's confidence and overall morale. The effects can be disastrous and nearly impossible to reverse." (thoughtco. 2020)

There is an emerging body of research examining the effect of poor teachers on student outcomes. Teachers can and do help develop attitudes and behaviours among their students that are important for success in life.

Teachers can be ineffective for a variety of reasons. Some have a weak grasp of the teaching material or are difficult to understand. Others are bad at controlling and directing their class. A teacher can be too aggressive or too passive, and ends up being either feared or not taken seriously by the students.

The issue of power abuse in the teaching of the arts also needs to be addressed. More often than not, the abuse of power, position and authority manifests itself as sexual abuse. Teachers of the arts exploit vulnerable students.

During the December 2018 Margazhi season in Chennai, several high-profile performers and teachers were named and shamed after allegations had been made about their philandering behaviour. Journalist for The Hindu, a national newspaper of India, writer Kumudha Bharathram quoted Swarmalya Ganesh as saying:

"Sexual harassment or abuse have never been spoken about in the open within the arts world. Now that the dialogue has begun, we have been working and watching closely how organisations take cognizance of this issue. We need sensitising awareness programmes on sexual safety. Every student, vidwan, stakeholder must comply. Don't we go through a class

and test before procuring a license to drive? Do the same in Sabhas for social behaviour before allowing someone to perform. We have been pushing for all this and it is being well received by Sabhas and organisations who see the responsibility that sits on their shoulders and also the urgency of the matter. So, if you ask me what's the new normal, I would say, safety first, Sangeetam next." (Bharathram, 2018)

Throwing light on the specifics of dialogue and accountability leading to a 'new normal' in the context of sexual harassment where perpetrators are exposed, Swarnamalya Ganesh, Dancer and Dance historian, expressed her outrage and other artists started what became a #MeToo movement to take such disturbing stories even further.

Has the time arrived for a Code of Ethics for all Bharathanatyam Dance makers and teachers? One Code of Ethics, written by The Chicago National Association of Dance Masters researched by Sophia Vangelatos states that, "A child's body is a precious thing. A Dance teacher is responsible for the physical development of this student; therefore, YOU must be proficient in the art forms that you teach." (2021:3)

In this code of ethics, the CNADM focuses on the physical safety of students. They urge Dance teachers to be proficient in their styles of Dance in order to teach accurately and safely. There is no mention of how teachers and choreographers have the power to harm students mentally and emotionally through their behaviours.

Vangelatos goes on to discuss Robin Lakes view on authoritarian practices in Dance: "In the quest for brilliance... something has gone amiss in the daily treatment of the very Dancers who contribute to making the artistic product brilliant." (Vangelatos, 2021:3). Lakes notes that choreographers who are renowned for their beautiful and inventive work, sadly exploit or mentally abuse their Dancers during rehearsal and performance processes. Some of the most famous choreographers win awards and create pieces about progressive social change and profound human values, yet somehow, they do not uphold these same values.

A nostalgic view of the above system gave licence to the *Shishya* to both experience life and the art to the fullest and with pure dedication. Up until around the year 2000, the *Guru-*

*Shishya* relationship in Chennai was well established and perceived by many as a sacred relationship. *Bhakti* – the total offering of devotion and love to something, or in this case someone such as a *Guru*, was accorded God-like status. Some *Gurus* maintained a family-like relationship through *Guru-Shishya Parampara*, their student becoming a part of their family. Many Dancers who shared that kind of close bonded relationship with their *Guru* are thankful for that time in their life, a kind of experience without which they would not have progressed.

Some critical views of this approach to teaching and learning include India-based Dance educationist, Aadya Katikar who noted:

The *Guru-shishya parampara* in its current avatar invisibly and uncritically shapes what students learn, adopt and practice in the Dance class. The teacher- student relationship is rigidly hierarchical and students learn to accept what is taught in class as 'knowledge'. Students learn to be submissive in face of the authority of their teacher (Kaktikar, 2016).

The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* instilled discipline which is vital in Bharathanatyam pedagogy. The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* was once widely practised in India as well as in other Asia countries with similar forms of training such as in the martial arts in Japan, but it never took root in South Africa in the same way. Instead, a teacher-student relationship developed locally. What might explain this? Were there too few *Gurus* to accept interested parents and their offspring? Did South Africa's strict child protection and Human Rights laws prevent such relationships? It is important to note that a *Guru* is different from a teacher who is likened to an instructor or one who merely conveys 'book knowledge' as opposed to Life knowledge. A *Guru* does more than teach – a *Guru* imparts divine knowledge as well as build his child's character and personality.

Interestingly, *Cyber Gurus* in the form of the laptop screen images have replaced the divinity-filled flesh and blood being. According to the *Natyashastra* (Ghosh, 1951), the teacher or *Acharya* and the student should have certain qualities, inner and acquired, which help them to fulfil the requirements of an ideal *Guru-Shishya* relationship. How faithful are we to this kind of relationship in South Africa?

There are also other challenges that confront the pedagogy of Bharathanatyam in India and South Africa and these will be further discussed in the final section of this chapter.

## Challenges Facing Bharathanatyam Pedagogy in South Africa and India

Ann Sööt and Ele Viskus regard a holistic (Dance) teacher as one who:

sees a person in its whole. Everything is intercommunication; it is a conscious activity of compiling learner's world view. Holistic approach of contemporary fragmented world should be involved with drawing the whole together - uniting the body and the mind, the teaching and the identity, the curriculum and the community, so that they could address the human as a whole. At the same time, the teacher should take into consideration that the whole is comprised of independent valuable parts, and should be able to identify and make constructive use of the real and possible connections between them (Sööt & Viskus, 2013:1194).

Traditionally taught in a *Guru-Shishya* environment, Bharathanatyam is multifaceted art that takes many years of *sadhana* (devoted practice and submission to the art) to master. (Kalakshetra, 2019). In Bharathanatyam, there are four aspects which work together within a Dancer: *Angikam* (the body language, technique, training and its execution), *Vachikam* (music text, word on which Dance is performed), *Aharya* (costume and jewellery) and his/her Satva (soul). (Abhinayadharpana, 1917 [ trans of 4-5<sup>th</sup> century]) Purvadhanashree in a recent blog stated that:

Angika, Vachika and Aharya are important in creating a meaningful exterior but what holds them together, prepares them, propels them into action, is the Dancer's Satva which is the soul, conscience, guide or inner voice. It holds these three together with the only purpose of being truthful to one's art. The outer world undergoes many transformations but the Satva doesn't change (Purvadhanashree, 2018).

Purvadhanashree's opinion illustrates that the first three aspects have undergone various changes wherever Bharathanatyam has been practised over the last few decades. She suggests, it is not a fatal flaw when Angikam, Vachikam and Aharya evolve so long as Satva remains intact and that the inner form of Bharathanatyam which is *Bhakti* is held at the centre.

Kothari maintained: "It is true that our arts is ancillary to our religions. But the restoration of faith in religion itself may be difficult in the age of faithlessness and money values" (2007:18) His comment demonstrates that many people are taken by the sheer beauty and glamour of the art which lacks the Satva (soul). His plea rings against commercialisation of the Dance form in the 21st century.

Every classical Dance form has come a long way from what was practised in its original form. Dancers are combining their learnings under various *Gurus* to find their individual expression.

Increasingly, the strict rules governing Bharathanatyam performance namely total devotion to the prescribed Dance form and the respect for tradition, appear to be ignored in South Africa. Parker Lewis' chastisement clearly explains this dilemma in South Africa: "Bharathanatyam seems to be altering overnight with all sorts of innovations (some rather inappropriate) in terms of spins, leaps and leg elevations with young Dancers introducing *Karanas* from the *Natya Shastra* without consideration for the integrity of *Karanas*" (Parker Lewis, 2016:4).

Kapila Vatsyayan, a leading scholar of Indian classical Dance, art, architecture, and art history in India, has stated that there is a direct distinction between Bharathanatyam and the earth's natural gravity. She claimed that "This explains its deliberate avoidance of terrific leaps and gliding movements in the air" (Vatsyayan, 1967:232). Vatsyayan concurs with Parker- Lewis and adds that there is nothing in the *Natya Shastra* by Bharatha Muni about Dancers having to leap and jump in the air when both hands and feet lose contact with the ground but "he does not do so in anyone of the 108 *Karanas*" (Vatsyayan, 1967:233). Instead, the *Karanas* – the coordinated action of the body, the hands and the feet – which are intended to spiritually elevate the audience are now used to seduce and transmit sexuality, thus losing the divinity of the *Karanas*.

Parker Lewis in conversation with me in 2018, also mentioned how experimentation within Bharathanatyam has resulted in the steps no longer resembling the traditional *Adavus*, and that just does not seem to happen in Ballet because in her opinion, there is a global standard for teaching and examining of the Dance form. Even the aspect of teaching Indian Dance in South Africa which is connected with holiness and which gave Bharathanatyam that aura of divinity, is slowly being stripped away by an absence of regulation, according to Parker Lewis. Furthermore, one of the present-day doyennes of Bharathanatyam, Vyjayanthimala Bali who has celebrated 76 years as a performing artist, presented a superb performance in Chennai on 25 October 2018 at the age of 86, radiating such *Bhakti*. In an article in The Hindu newspaper titled "I am always a student", Nandini Ramani wrote that Vyjayanthimala Bali maintains that she owed her excellence and dedication to the art to her teacher. She inherited *Bhakti* that is indescribable and approaches the form with respect. Mentioned in this respected newspaper, she said:

In my own way, I would like to stick to my artistic principles amidst varied things happening in the Bharathanatyam field. I always consider myself a student. Novelty for the sake of popularity is not my motto. The beauty and divinity of Bharathanatyam will keep me alive and all these years I have worked hard to bring forth the spirit of joy through my performances (Bali in Ramani, October 2018).

According to the *Natyashastra*, religious rituals were performed to rid the temple and performance space of any evil that may alter the performance. By performing a *rangapuja* in which the Dancer places deities on the performance space to invoke blessings from God and a *pushpanjali*, an invocation Dance where flowers are placed at the feet of the deity *Nataraja* as a mark of respect. This ritual is performed at an *arangetram* when the Dancer enters the stage for the first time. She also performs a *pushpanjali* at the end and bows down before Lord Nataraja before she leaves the space (Ghosh, 1951). Emphasising the divine nature of Bharathanatyam and how important it is for all aspects of the Dance to be taught and learnt properly, Anita Ratnam says the Dance form is “like temple architecture - the idea is that you work from the outside into the inside. It is a journey of *nritta* into *abhinaya* and the final being an *aarti* or offering to the Gods which is the *thillana* (Ratnam, personal interview, Durban 2018).

Assistant Professor of Theatre at Williams College, Massachusetts Shanti Pillai observed the current state of Indian Dance schools when she claimed: “There are unprecedented numbers of people proclaiming themselves to be Dancers and giving concerts throughout the city on almost any night of the week” (2002:20). She continued that those who run such establishments may or may not be recognised as experts in the field, which does not seem to prevent them from receiving large numbers of students and producing *arangetrams* by the score. Pillai lamented:

We don't have *Gurus* today. We have greedy teachers now. A *Guru* was a person who was not on the market. When you teach like say, *abhinaya*, now, it's in a highly publicized two-week workshop costing some few thousand rupees or whatever. That's called commodification of art. And if we are talking that Dancers are mediocre, it's because *Gurus* are mediocre. They are just market-savvy (Pillai, S. 2002:18).

Bharata Muni, writing the *Natyashastra*, envisioned that for years to the come Dance should be kept alive in its pristine state. (Ghosh, 1951). Gertrude Shurr and Rachael Dunaven Yocom discuss the responsibility of technical Dance work and creative/artistic Dance work as:

Rest[ing] entirely with each individual, for student and Dancer can only communicate in terms of the known vocabulary. Dance vocabulary may be changed, distorted, extended or combined for well understood purposes and effects, but the “known” is the basis of change (Shurr, & Yocom, 1949:6).

Today we are struggling to retain the laid down rules. Experimentation and cross-cultural fusion have eroded the traditional style. V.P. Dhananjayan exclaimed, “What is reprehensible is change for the sake of change, with the sole purpose of attracting the masses, unmindful of the vulgarity that might creep in under the guise of newness” (Dhananjayan 1991:56).

Pallabi Chakravorty (2006) invites further questioning of the multiple narratives of Kathak dance in India and Modernity which can be borrowed for an investigation of Bharathanatyam. In Bharathanatyam a Dancer can be required to master the execution of all 50 gestures with use of a single hand and the use of both hands. As Bharathanatyam work comprises not only gestures but *Adavus* and set sequences, this area needs further investigation. To understand the shifting dynamics that affect Bharathanatyam, the art form and its teaching, I begin to unpack Bharathanatyam that is firmly rooted within the culture that governs it. In the next chapter, I will problematise the notion of culture and locate practices of Bharathanatyam in the multicultural contexts of South Africa and India.

### CHAPTER THREE – *KEERTANAM*

In this section I will discuss the notion of culture, beginning with some sociological definitions. I also look at the role Bharathanatyam has played as a bearer of Indian values in art and religion.

Culture may be defined as the way of life of a group of people. Culture, according to American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (1973:89). It is their behavioural DNA, passed down through generations, and characterises their outlook, attitudes, values, morals, traditions, goals, beliefs, manners and customs. Culture is, therefore, an inter-generational phenomenon. Cultural practices are constructed by ancestors and transferred from birth by parents, siblings, communities, teachers, priests and even shopkeepers. The notion that a person may be culturally neutral has been rejected by scholars such as Stuart Hall (1997 &2006).

To be cultured is not only to be accomplished in, for example, music or dancing but to be an advocate for a set of values and beliefs that is passed down faithfully to each generation in spite of geographic boundaries. “Bharathanatyam transcends national and cultural boundaries yet remains resolutely tied to them. It circulates globally but operates as a symbol of the exotic” (O’Shea, 2009:4). Bharathanatyam can be seen to be a semiotic means of communicating meaning. Music, body movements such as hand gestures and facial expressions are combined to transmit messages, thoughts, or emotions. Bharathanatyam embraces symbolism to create a feeling of Godliness in the viewer, more especially when stories are being narrated from religious scriptures such as the *Ramayan* or *Mahabharata*. The function of culture is to create frames of meaning within which various peoples live out their lives. What happens when cultures move away from their geographic spaces and the periods in history when they began?

Theatre and Dance professor Ketu Katrak based at the University of California Irvine remarked “Relocated peoples constitute diasporic communities linked by national, regional, religious, artistic, and professional commonalities. Robin Cohen, in *Global Diasporas*, analyses how communities bond around common allegiances such as religion, language, cultural expressions, and indigenous festivals among other factors” (Katrak, 2011:154) A diaspora may

be defined as a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographic locale. It may be scattered in countries throughout the world, and the people will still practice the customs and traditions of the mother group. Indian diaspora are found in South Africa, Mauritius, UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand and several other countries. The diaspora communities will still look to India as the Motherland for cultural sustenance, even after being in the diaspora host country for generations.

In the South African Indian diaspora, it is common that certain cultural nuances are passed on from one generation to the next, and was especially true in the days when the 'joint-family' system<sup>62</sup> was prevalent. The cultural practices would pass for example, from grandfather, to son, to grandson. However, in South Africa with the uprooting of settled communities as a result of migration from farms and rural areas to larger cities and the pernicious Group Areas Act (1950), such joint families broke into smaller nuclear family units and 'joint-families' were dislocated from their places of birth. The entire intergenerational phenomenon became weaker. Arjun Appadurai had noted:

The Dance form, and especially its amateur practice, also provides a means for immigrants to maintain their social identity in diaspora. It offers South Asian communities in Europe and North America an implement for, in Appadurai's (1996) terms, intentional cultural reproduction and, thus, for the reiteration of the homeland's culture in diaspora. (O'Shea, 2009:3).

Bharathanatyam has been part of intergenerational cultural reproduction for decades. Parents saw it as their responsibility to inculcate Indian cultural values in their children, and this included ways of worship learnt through Indian Dance and music and other Indian customs and rituals especially those that occurred during festivals such as *Deepavali*, *Shivarathri* and *Navarathri*.

While on the one hand Bharathanatyam is viewed as being part of Indian culture, it can also be counted among the wider South African Dance culture which embraces, multiculturalism and comprises various cultures such as Indian culture, Zulu culture, Afrikaner culture, European culture, amongst others. Furthermore, as mentioned by Geertz in Schneider:

The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an

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<sup>62</sup> Ruggles (2010) defined the joint family as a multigenerational family, whereby two or more married children are living at home.

animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be, therefore, not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical (Schneider, 1987:810).

From this interpretation above, we can ascertain that Bharathanatyam was expected to be the custodian of the Dance form as both a performing art and a cultural entity.

### **Indian Dance as a carrier of culture in the Motherland and the diaspora**

Bharathanatyam is one of those “inherited conceptions”, (Geertz 1973), that many Indians (in the diaspora) believe keeps them embedded in their culture. Dance for Bharata Muni - often considered as the father of Indian theatrical forms - was sacred and a devotional ritual rather than a recreational past-time (Ghosh, 2021). According to Sklar, “the way people move is more than art, and more than entertainment. All movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge” (Sklar, 1991:30). This will include the movements of Bharathanatyam which position it as not mere entertainment but art and spiritual practice too.

Down through the ages, Dance in the West constituted a significant part of Theatre especially when it was used to narrate from literature such as epic poems and plays such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* by Sophocles. Dance in India on the other hand promoted right-living through the telling of religious stories which influenced cultural habits and practices. When Dance was presented as worship by Devadasi and earlier nautch Dancers, it was believed to invoke spiritual blessings. According to Parker Lewis, Bharata Muni’s treatise on Dance, the *Natyashastra*, tells the performer to “keep the needs of the audience in mind” (2012:121). Parker Lewis says “*natya* was designed as a means of diverting people away from negative everyday occurrences; it was to offer comfort and composure to the sorrowful and the agitated” (2012:121).

In an effort to restore and maintain culture, religion as well as spirituality in an evolving world, there is the assumption by some students and their parents that Bharathanatyam would make you Godly. This relationship will be discussed in further detail in later chapters.

Religion and Dance in Hinduism share a strong relationship - “the essence of Hinduism is inclusivity, a reason why it is referred to as *Sanathana Dharma*<sup>63</sup> and understanding the values of one’s *dharma* can make the world a better place” (Srinivasan in Swaminathan, 2018) Sklar suggests that the concept of looking at movement as just something pretty to the eye is of the past (1991). She continues to drive people’s thinking towards “an approach that considers movement performance not just as visual spectacle but as a kinaesthetic, conceptual, and emotional experience that depends upon cultural learning” (Sklar, 1991:32).

Both in South Africa, and globally, there seems to be a presumption within the Indian diaspora that by sending children to learn an Indian classical Dance form like Bharathanatyam, rather than hip-hop or freestyle Western Dance form, the child will thus be a cultured Hindu and embrace the values, attitudes and behaviour of the Indian Motherland. According to O’Shea:

the practice of Bharata Natyam therefore endorses all allegiance to a homeland on the part of South Asians outside of the subcontinent. For these individuals, Bharatanatyam expresses a set of “traditional Indian values” (Gatson, 1991) that endures over time (O’Shea, 2009:55).

On the other hand, in India, studying the Dance form of Bharathanatyam is seen primarily as a way to overcome life’s hurdles by attaining a spiritual awakening and an aspect of social mobility. Indian Dance teachers expect their students to engage with the Dance form by pushing their bodies to breaking point in order to find a higher spiritual connection. According to celebrated practitioner and Bharathanatyam advocate, Chennai-based Anita Ratnam asserts, “Bharathanatyam is a way of life in our culture.”<sup>64</sup> She further describes crash courses in Bharathanatyam as ‘India 101 courses’ that give you the opportunity to hear the music, understand social systems and explore complex human relationships. It is true that art forms such as Dance and music constitute a richly intertwined way of life in India as well as the diaspora. This is linked to the *Bhakti* aspect of Bharathanatyam. Since devout Hindus revere anything that is connected to religion/prayer/worship, for example, a cow can be sacred, many flowers, plants and trees are linked to specific Gods. Thus, Indian children are urged to

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<sup>63</sup> *Dharma* is whatever leads us toward happiness and away from suffering; it is whatever destroys the root of suffering.

<sup>64</sup> Ratnam, personal interview, Hilton Hotel, Durban 2018.

learn Bharathanatyam as a form which has multiple references to the pantheon of Hindu deities which connect man with the divine/Godliness.<sup>65</sup>

During a Bharathanatyam Dance class conducted by me in Durban in 2020, I perceived a sense of discomfort in some young children learning what they seemed to position as a foreign Dance. The children in the class were from Indian families. I asked these children why they enrolled for Bharathanatyam lessons. A seven-year-old student confessed: “Some of my friends are going for karate lessons. I wanted to go with them, but my parents said we are religious Hindus and, therefore, I must learn Bharathanatyam”.<sup>66</sup> It sometimes happens that parents will compel their children to do something against their will which may stem from their desire for their sons and daughters to follow family traditions and adhere to their cultural roots. These relationships between children, parents and teachers will be elaborated in later chapters.

Many Hindus yearn to experience *Moksh* or enlightenment - thus making them become one with God when they are sincerely performing the Dance form. As a practising Hindu, I undergo this spiritual experience whenever I Dance a richly complex aspect from any of the scriptures. I give it all my energy - especially when I perform at a temple or on a special religious occasion. I remain curious to further investigate the reasons why students learn Bharathanatyam. I concur with cultural theorist, Hall, who “rejected Marx’s reductive notion of culture as a passive, secondary, reflection in order to stress its active, primary, constitutive role in society” (Hall, 1958:16). The transfer of culture is both active, such as performing customary rituals, and passive such as gestures and mannerisms (greeting with folded palms or shaking your head).

Teachers around the world have now established schools with the aim to preserve and foster Indianness in the community, says Hema Rajagopalan who runs the Natya Dance Theatre in Chicago. In this sense ‘Indianness’ refers to all things emanating from India - in relation to Dance, it will be music, songs, costumes, jewellery, the history, the poets, warriors, philosophers, heroes and heroines. (Warnecke, 2019). Los Angeles-based Dancer Vigi Prakash, founder of Shakti Dance School, concurs that the transmigration of Bharathanatyam

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<sup>65</sup> Ratnam, personal interview, Hilton Hotel, Durban, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with child at Durban Bharathanatyam school in July 2019.

“...celebrates the human spirit and is not only limited to the portrayal of the Hindu pantheon, but can explore any issue that may arise in today’s world” (Prakash, n.d).

Hinduism is kept very much alive in India. In Chennai, on almost every second street, a shrine to one or more Gods can be spotted, a clear indication of the high place that religion has in people’s lives. Parker Lewis mentioned that she was asked if she was a Hindu. As a white South African woman who chose to study Indian Dance, and not a born Hindu, Parker Lewis developed a special place for Hinduism after learning more about the religion from living in Chennai and gaining knowledge on the deities that surrounded her. Parker Lewis revealed that: “I experienced a devastating spiritual void when I returned to South Africa. God is definitely alive and well and living in India.” (Parker Lewis, 2012: 24)

### **Dance culture in Durban’s Indian diaspora.**

In Durban, Hindus are fortunate to have several temples that are in close proximity to residential areas. However, many of the youth of today of all religious groups do not pay much time and effort to their religion unless urged to do so by older generations. There seems to be a preference by some ‘South African Indians’<sup>67</sup> to look to India, even post-Apartheid, as their cultural umbilical cord. Thus, in the same way that they maintain religious rituals in temples, they regard Bharathanatyam which originated in India as a significant point of reference or link. Bharathanatyam is the spiritual and theatrical heritage of India and for Bharathanatyam Dancers in South Africa, Bharathanatyam’s links to India help us face our dispersion from the Motherland even when we cannot return. Hall wrote that we need to be reminded that “diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all cost return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea” (Hall, 1970:130). While the Indian diaspora in South Africa regards itself as South African first and foremost, there are those, especially the older generation who look to India and all things that emanated from there for cultural sustenance, such as music, movies, dress, spicy foods, language and religion. Many Indians nurture a dual identity- they owe national and political allegiance to South Africa and still cherish aspects of their Indian roots.

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<sup>67</sup> South Africans of Indian origin. Either through indentured Indians or passenger Indians.

Gradually, the link to India is becoming diluted for the younger generation of Born Frees - those who were born after the fall of Apartheid in 1994 and who may perceive Bharathanatyam as 'outdated'. However, a parallel could be drawn for the youth between fantasy stories about Superman, Batman or even Spiderman and the likes of Hindu Gods- Shiva, Vishnu or even Krishna. This comparison paves the way to an understanding of the stories that are told through Bharathanatyam. These narratives of the Gods and Goddesses can be a lens through which to also view our daily contemporary lives. As a Bharathanatyam Dancer, one is tasked to find the divinity in everything since it was traditionally a Dance offered to the Gods in temples. Thus, relationships between a mother and her son link to the Dances featuring Yashoda and Lord Krishna, and husband and wife relate to so many stories of Lord Shiva and the Goddess Parvathi.

The cultural aspects of Bharathanatyam were ingrained in me from the age of five when I was able to count at least to 10. I attended my earliest Bharathanatyam lesson and from that first moment was captivated since I belonged to a family that was already steeped in Hindu traditions and Indian culture. For as long as I can remember, I enjoyed being involved in Indian cultural pursuits. I can vividly recall how, dressed in a white Punjabi (an Indian dress that has a long shirt that comes to your knee paired with a loose-fitting pants), I was taught to leave my shoes outside the Dance classroom before entering this sacred space. Similarly, wearing of shoes, belts and other artefacts, especially if these were made of leather, is taboo in Hindu places of worship. I learnt from that tender age that the Dance classroom and the temple were sacred spaces.

I later learnt that this was the expected way in which to pay respect to the space in which we were to Dance and that this apparently ordinary space would be transformed into a sacred space. I then greeted my *Guru*, Yogambal Singaram, by saying "Vanakkam", a *Tamil* salutation which was taught to me by my parents. My *Guru* (Dance teacher) warmly welcomed me to my first class. I was then taught the Dance prayer - known as the *Dhayana Shlokam* - which is in praise of the Hindu God of Dance, Lord Nataraja. A Bharathanatyam Dancer starts and ends every Dance session with this prayer. (Kriya, 2013) The Dancer pays respect to the teacher and the audience, and then touches Mother Earth and asks her permission to stamp on her during dancing. Thus, the Dance studio and the stage for a Bharathanatyam Dance performance becomes holy ground. Following the Dance prayer, tuition of the *Aramandi* posture begins –

a half-sitting position, known in the western world as a pli . My young body had to adjust to the position which was quite painful and it took me a long time to get accustomed to it. But it was important that this foundational posture is perfected because it is prominent in Bharathanatyam. For two years I practised *Adavus* (the steps) before moving onto learning the *Alaripu*, the first full-length Dance in a sea of Bharathanatyam Dances.

In this next section I attempt to trace some of the practices of Bharathanatyam in Durban post-Apartheid in order to navigate the pedagogies that surround this form of Dance.

The advent of Democracy in South Africa presented challenges to the Indian performing arts. The Indian Dancer had to embrace other cultures and their Dances in the new, multicultural South Africa. According to Judge Jody Kollapen, South African Human Rights Commissioner, Indian Dancers have to be open minded. Kollapen wrote:

When we look at ourselves as South Africans, we face all kinds of challenges. One is our identity. Who are we? Are we Indians? Are we Indian South Africans? Are we South African Indians? And culture is a very important component of who we are, defining our existence ... Without a doubt, we have a strong umbilical cord to our origins in India and we should not be ashamed about that and be proud about that. We should wear our culture proudly on our arm, but at the same time, we should remind ourselves that we live in Africa, and our destiny is inextricably linked to the people of this continent ... The Constitution doesn't just require us to advance and respect our culture. It requires us also to be South African - to step outside the box of our own culture and to embrace other cultures; to be enriched by those cultures. That is the challenge in many respects for South Africans of Indian origin (in Maharaj, 2019)

Indian culture and traditions had been largely side-lined by the various arms of the Apartheid government, including education departments, which have removed Indian languages from the school syllabi and departments of arts and culture which have slashed budgets usually enjoyed by Indian cultural organisations. (Friedman, 2012) Concern about the dilution of Indian Dance took centre stage when the first Indian Dance conference was hosted in South Africa by Vasugi Singh (Bharathanatyam teacher) and Smeetha Maharaj (*Kathak teacher*). The conference, *Nritya Sammelan 2000* was hosted by the Playhouse Company . The conference set out to address the debate on traditional Dance versus modern contemporary Dance. Scholarly papers were presented by South Africans such as Jay Pather, Jayesperi Moopen, Gerard Samuel and Indian nationals such as Anita Ratnam, Pratap Pawar and Vaibhav Joshi (Ratnam, 2000). There were vibrant discussions around Indian Dance on global stages within

a multi-cultural world and the tensions of innovative trends such as emergent disability arts<sup>68</sup>. The view that Bharathanatyam and its North Indian classical Dance form *Kathak*, are woven into the Indian cultural fabric and must not be altered was contested by a small group of classical Dancers under the banner of the “Anti-fusion” lobby. They delivered a memorandum to the conference calling for Bharathanatyam and *Kathak* to remain pure and unsullied by the infusion of other Dance genres. (Ratnam, 2000) At a more recent Indian Dance conference, *From Indenture to Stage*, hosted by South African Indian Dance Alliance in November 2020, international Indian Dance luminary, Chitra Sundaram, maintained that some courageous choreographers such as Shobana Jeysingh seem to have their finger on the pulse of working within their traditions and at the same time presenting work that is “in” and of the contemporary world. In one of the breakaway discussions titled: *Where to from here?* the young presenters 20 years later still seemed to grapple with the old questions of fusion and unsullied tradition.

There still prevails among some conservative South African Indians the notion that Bharathanatyam will assist the second and third generations to retain an Indianness in a multilingual, multi-racial and multi-religious South Africa. Thus, many Dance schools attempt to teach Bharathanatyam to anyone interested.

Furthermore, there would appear to be waning interest in an appreciation of Bharathanatyam when it is being performed on stage. For example, in July 2019, one of the world’s leading exponents of Bharathanatyam, Rama Vaidyanathan from India, was in Durban for just one performance. Only 50 people were in the auditorium. The worst insult one can inflict on an A-grade internationally renowned artist is to open the curtains on an almost empty auditorium. In India, tickets are sold out weeks in advance for Vaidyanathan’s performances. Is this the respect students and teachers of Bharathanatyam and the South African Dance community at large show for Bharathanatyam in South Africa?

There may be several reasons for the poor showing at Vaidyanathan’s performance and further research will be required to resolve these questions. It would seem that the majority of Indians in South Africa have lost touch with Bharathanatyam and other classical art forms such as *Carnatic* music, choosing instead to imbibe more popular and global Dance and music

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<sup>68</sup> Samuel 2020 telecon.

forms, for example, Bollywood, hip-hop and fusion. It would appear that many Indians prefer to align with the new South Africa and want to embrace African-ness rather than be seen to be clinging to their Indian “roots”.

Poor turn-out of non-Indians at typically Indian Dance and music performances, can be linked to the consequences of Apartheid and its legacy of racial segregation. Before racist laws were eradicated, race groups were kept apart on the basis of skin colour and, therefore, there was no cross-pollination of artistic and cultural experiences. Since the dawn of Democracy in 1994, there has been little effort, in my experience, by the new government to expose non-Indians across South Africa to Indian performing art forms. Some locally produced Indian themed films such as *The Kandasamys* and *Material* offer insights into an SA Indian world through the genre of comedy.

Many non-Indians have taken a deep and abiding interest in the Indian performing arts and culture. For example, American-based Theatre scholar Richard Schechner drew inspiration for some of his works from his travels through India and his experiences with Indian performances. Schechner, commenting on his theory of Interculturalism said, “the more contact among people the better. The more we, and everyone else too, can perform our own and other peoples’ cultures, the better” (Schechner, 1984:246). But Indian Theatre scholar based in New Delhi university, Rustom Bharucha, contested this view reminding us that inherent in any cultural exchange is the whole question of ‘power relationships’ between the intersecting groups (Bharucha, 1984).

In the new “Rainbow Nation” that constitutes South Africa, there is a greater need for interculturalism where other cultures are explored and appreciated by those whose roots are not in that culture. According to Schechner, “intercultural exchange takes a teacher: someone who knows the body of performance of the culture being translated. The translator of culture is not a mere agent, as a translator of words might be, but an actual culture-bearer” (Schechner, 1984:247). Schechner pointed out that:

The newer generation of Dancers have not embodied the culture of the traditional form. There seems to be a playing around with technique, because of a lack of knowledge of the deeper nuances of the Dance - ‘techniques can’t simply be lifted from one context and grafted onto work that comes from another’. (Schechner, 1984:2)

Prominent South African Dance scholar based in Durban Lliane Loots questions Schechner's views pointing out, "the problematic debates around notions of cultural exchange, multiculturalism, interculturalism and fusion in performance" (Loots, 2012:52). A classic example of misinterpreting culture according to Bharucha would be that of Peter Brook's *Mahabharatha*. The sacred *Mahabharatha* text can be seen as one of the sacred literary works of Hinduism, thus Bharucha described Brook's work as, "taken one of the significant texts and decontextualized it from its history in order to 'sell' it to audiences in the West" (1988:35). The culture is being sold devoid of its contextual origins. Sadly, in South Africa, the spiritual aspects of Bharathanatyam are also being divorced from the artistic aspects of the Dance form. There is scant respect being shown for the traditional and religious aspects that have been kept at the core of this Dance form for centuries. This present chapter has examined Indian culture and the role played by Bharathanatyam as a carrier of values, attitudes and behaviour in Indian art and religion. I have commented on Bharathanatyam Dance in the diaspora and the Motherland and specifically outlined a context for Bharathanatyam practice in Durban. Since the crux of this research was to establish shifts in Bharathanatyam teaching, including whether there has been a fall in the standard of teaching and learning Bharathanatyam in South Africa, this research investigates how Dance classes were conducted in Durban and Chennai? What does the shift in Bharathanatyam practice mean for its longevity in SA? These questions will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

In the next chapter I will clarify my methodological choices given these contextual frames and critical questions posed around practices in Bharathanatyam in Durban and Chennai.

## CHAPTER FOUR — *SHABDAM*

This study employs a qualitative research methodology as the basis for this dissertation as it was expected that teachers would have different perspectives and recollections of historical events. I wanted to reflect the complexity of my critical question and support the validity of data as no two teachers could be expected to give identical answers, even when reflecting on the same Dance class or performance responses (Green, 2015). My own perspectives come from both an etic and emic response which I will expand on later in this chapter (Cheng et al, 2016).

I will also explain my hermeneutical stance in relation to which I would interpret the various responses and events that I attended (Stinson, 1984). It would be necessary for me, not only as a researcher but also a student of Bharathanatyam, to offer my own experiences – therefore, I have provided a brief auto-ethnography point of view in the Introduction above and reflect on my first-hand accounts of classes, workshops and performances (Hamilton & Worthington, 2008). It was necessary to adopt a broad sociological view of this Dance community as they may be both similarities and differences to be found in each country, society and community which I intend to analyse.

Finally, I will expand on the modes of research that were conducted including comparative (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009) case studies of teachers and learners of Bharathanatyam. In this chapter I discuss the process of gathering data through interviews and my participant observation at six Dance classes conducted by various teachers. I will describe and interpret my experiences as both an etic observer and a participant of emic experiences of Bharathanatyam. In this sense, I analyse my data in the next chapter through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens attempting to think about the whole experience of this Dance in all its complexity. I clarify the ethical approaches that were followed with respect to consent and privacy of all the teachers and students who I interviewed and who are included in this study.

The different *Baanis* (styles)<sup>69</sup> of teaching and performing Bharathanatyam will be unpacked in order to draw comparisons to similar practices in Dance forms in the west, for example, in classical Ballet one could argue there is a Vaganova method, Cecchetti method (Italian) and

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<sup>69</sup> See Chapter Four where I have expanded on *Baanis*.

the Royal Academy of Dancing (London, England) teaching method (British). This can result in a uniformity of style in each method. This then begs the question: how are the various styles of Bharathanatyam being taught and adhered to (or not) in South Africa, and by whom?

## **Research methodology**

As stated earlier, this study will explore the shifts in the teaching practices of Bharathanatyam in South Africa when compared with Chennai.

As a researcher I am aware of both qualitative and quantitative research. I have chosen to conduct a qualitative methodological investigation of Dance pedagogy with regards to Bharathanatyam. Qualitative research is a method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication. It is not only about finding out “what” people think but also “why” they think so (Hamilton, 2008). There are many data collection strategies for conducting qualitative researches such as one-on-one interviews, group sessions, observation and archival records analysis (Alsaawi, 2014). The interview has the potential to access the life-world of the respondent, to articulate their lived meanings, “to make visible the invisible” (Kvale, 1996:53), not just in exploring the subject’s consciousness, but in gaining insight into his or her perspectives, understandings, reactions, plans, imaginings, jealousies, strategies, hostilities, madness, reasonings, hurts, ambitions, loves, losses - verily his or her life stories past, present and future (Samuel, 2016:94).

Interviewing has its own limitation in gathering all the information required, so rather than using only one approach, I have combined several methods to provide a wider source of information (Hanstein, 1999 and Alsaawi, 2014). The qualitative research approach facilitates an unpacking of different perspectives.

## **Genealogical study**

This research could be considered an epistemological and ontological study, and is based on fieldwork in an attempt to trace Dance teachers in South Africa to their *Gurus* in India and their styles or *Baanis*. It is a study of people and events in their own environment using methods such as observation, participation and face-to-face and online interviews. An ethnographic study involves an immersion in the site-gathering information from different

geographical locations and persons with varied educational backgrounds. This study intends to provide a more holistic understanding of the varying methods of teaching Dance. An ontology is concerned with claims about the nature of being and existence and the beliefs about such a reality. In this sense a wider paradigm of Bharathanatyam and its teaching is held in this study.

In conducting this research, I have attempted to take an outsider's view, even though I am aware that to be objective, given my close relationships with so many of the teachers, is unrealistic. I have embraced the emic approach and argue that my closeness is also an asset, allowing me to find intimacies about Bharatanatyam that may not be available to other researchers. My 'closeness' includes that I am a practitioner of the form; I speak the Tamil language in which much of the Dance is taught, especially in India; and I am a practising Hindu, familiar with many of the traditional rituals and beliefs that permeate Bharathanatyam.

## **Fieldwork**

As a Bharathanatyam Dancer I conducted this research from my personal experience of learning the traditional Dance form both in South Africa, Durban and Chennai, India. I looked at how the schools of thought may differ or what similarities teachers share. I reflected upon the standard of Dance teaching in the diaspora and the possible reasons for the current, in my view, diminished level of praxis. This was born out of questions around the pedagogy of Bharathanatyam.

The research interviews involved six Dance practitioners, three from South Africa - Smeetha Maharaj, Vasugi Singh and Jayesperi Moopen - and three from Chennai - Professor Sudharani Raghupathy, Dr Sreelatha Vinod and Shrimati Satyabhama. (These interviews have been transcribed and abstracts can be found in the appendix.)

For the purpose of this dissertation, I chose to observe Bharathanatyam classes in Durban and Chennai over a period of two years (2019 and 2020). I set out to watch classes live at two specific studios on three separate occasions - a total of six hours each, per teaching studio/school. Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020, I had to make the arrangement for teachers to allow me to attend virtual/online classes held over the Zoom digital platform. The choice of classes to observe in Chennai and Durban, was based on

teachers who shared a common *Maha Guru* or were deliberately from the same *baani*, one that could be traced back to a specific *Maha Guru*. Before I unpack the observations at the schools, I need to clarify what the *Baanis* were and from whom they had arisen.

### ***Baanis* of Bharathanatyam**

In this section of the study, I will describe the different styles of Bharathanatyam known as *Baanis*. The word *Baani*, is a “unique term used in the field of art and education in India. It may refer to a school of thought, teaching, methodology, or to a particular method of presentation.” (Vishwanathan, et al., 2016) I will be specifically focusing on three existing *Baanis* for the purpose of this study.

The *baani* tradition dates back to between 5<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> century AD and again rose from the 10<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, reaching its peak from 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> century AD till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to rules set in place for temple worship known as *Agamas*, Dance and music were important principles of daily *puja*<sup>70</sup> of deities in temples. These were strictly adhered to in South Indian temples from around the 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Bharathanatyam, then known as *Sadir*, prospered thanks to the dedication of both practice and performance by *Devadasis* and their *Gurus* who were referred to as *Nattuvanars*.

*Nattuvanars* were well-versed in all divisions of Bharathanatyam, but more specifically singing, keeping the beats and most importantly, composing and creating music for Dance as well as the *Adavus*, *abhinaya* that accompany it. It is important to note that *Nattuvanars* developed their own variations of Bharathanatyam which could involve a slight posture change or movement of the body. These subtle variations formed the signature style or '*baani*' of a particular *Guru* and would be passed down to the ensuing generations of students.

As noted above, some teachers in Durban shared a connection with teachers in Chennai. Priya Murle is a disciple of Professor Sudharani Raghupathy who was assisted by NV Nagarajan who taught *Adavus*. Yogambal Singaram learnt directly under NV Nagarajan. Sreedevi Priya from Chennai can be paired with Manormani Govender from Durban. Both were disciples of Indra Rajen. Uma Anand from Chennai learnt from her father K.N Dandayudhapani Pillai.

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<sup>70</sup> Worship or prayer.

Kantharuby Munsamy learnt under K.N Pakkriswamy Pillai and his elder brother K.N Dandayudhapani.

These *Baanis* passed down generationally with Bharathanatyam teachers in South Africa in the 2000s as they had learnt Bharathanatyam in Chennai approximately 40 years ago.

I have chosen to look at specific *Acharyas*<sup>71</sup> for the purpose of this study, who come directly from the *Nattuvanar* tradition and belong to specific *Baanis*, because these disciples are among the first generation of teachers in South Africa who studied in India. Many of this pioneer generation are still running Bharathanatyam Dance schools today.

A *baani* is intrinsic to Bharathanatyam and can be likened to the various hues that make up a colourful mosaic. Yet there is no single definition for *baani*. It is variously referred to as 'style', 'discipline', 'tradition' and 'expression' (Viswanathan, 2016). The *baani* is crucial to identify what aesthetic principles and vision of Bharathanatyam a guru was passing on to his pupils through adherence to strict precepts of his lessons. Moving away from an established *baani* would result in a jumble of postures and possible incoherence. Esteemed Bharathanatyam Dancer Alarmel Valli emphasizes:

The importance of the *baani* / बानी in which a Dancer is trained, the Dance 'lineage' that one inherits from one's Gurus, is a vital factor in shaping one's creative growth. A Dancer may be exceptionally talented and the Guru may be totally painstaking. But if the *baani* or *vazhi* / वज्ही to which one belongs is impoverished, flawed or shallow, one's artistic evolution may well be stunted. The qualities that make each *baani* distinct from the other, stem from the individualistic manner in which the Dance alphabets are woven together, the specific ways in which the technical dimensions are interpreted and not in the least, from the aesthetic principles, ideals, perceptions and artistic vision of the Gurus, who shaped their *Baanis* and directed their evolution. The Dance *baani* is like a vast, majestic banyan tree. The Gurus are the branches that send down many roots, so that the tree grows and spreads, vital and vibrant (Vishwanathan et al., 2016).

Over the centuries scores of *Baanis* existed. However, with the passage of time only a handful have emerged to play a defining role as to whose aesthetics and principles are being followed to this day. Geographical location was important for a *Baani* and would take the name of the *Nattavunars'* place of prominence. For example, the *baani* of the Tanjore Court of the 12<sup>th</sup> century was named Tanjore *Baani*/Pandanallur *Baani*.

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<sup>71</sup> Disciple.

In the next chapter, I will unpack some of the responses from Dance practitioners to my critical questions of pedagogies of Bharathanatyam and observations from Dance classes, to understand the nature of the generational shifts in Durban and Chennai.

## CHAPTER FIVE — VARNAM

At the outset, I place on record that all participants of this study have granted their full and unreserved permission for the use of their actual names and frank responses given for the purposes of research (see also a Deed of Gift document as well as a Consent Form in Appendix #). As this is a study which traces the pedagogical threads of South African Indian Dance teachers and their baani, the study intentional utilises the names of these pioneer teachers with their full consent and permission. In some way this study validates and honours their legacies and contributions to the preservation of Bharatanatyam for over 60 years.<sup>72</sup>

In this chapter, I will interpretate interviews with leading Dance practitioners in India - Sudharani Raghupathy, Shrimati Satyabhama and Sreelatha Vinod. This is followed by my analysis of the South African interviews with Smeetha Maharaj, Vasugi Singh and Jayespri Moopen. In the next section, I will comprehend fieldwork that I conducted which consisted of observing Bharathanatyam Dance classes in Durban and Chennai with special focus on teaching of *Adavus* and the pupils' form.

### Interviews conducted with Chennai-based Dance practitioners

Three senior Dance practitioners were interviewed in Chennai in January-March 2020.

**Professor Sudharani Raghupathy** who is acclaimed by many as a living legend has been in the field of Bharathanatyam for more than seven decades. A graduate in Philosophy and Sociology from the University of Mysore, she founded Shree Bharatalaya, an institution of fine arts that has produced valuable resource material - books containing Dance compositions and handbooks on how to appreciate, interpret and teach Bharathanatyam.

**Shrimathi Satyabhama** who studied Bharathanatyam at Kalakshetra for 15 years under Rukmini Devi's supervision, taught the Dance form in South Africa and the USA for many years, and ran the Institute of Indian Art & Culture in both countries, with a comprehensive syllabus, and many experienced and knowledgeable artists visiting and teaching at the Institute. Hence, she has a clear view of Bharathanatyam in India, South Africa and USA. During her time in

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<sup>72</sup> It must be noted that participants who requested to check how they had been quoted in the study, they were provided with a copy of the text. Participants were afforded the opportunity to record the Dance classes had they wished to.

South Africa before she returned to India, she is reputed to have raised the level of Bharathanatyam to a supreme standard of perfection

**Dr Sreelatha Vinod** is a Bharathanatyam Dancer who is also much-admired for exceptional elegance, subtlety and grace. She commands great respect for her classicism and her deeply emotive *abhinaya* capability. Her art combines the tradition-bound purity of her *Gurus*, the Dhananjayans, as well as an infectious and disarming joy in the inner realm of the art. Vinod has completed her doctoral studies at the Tamil University - Thanjavur in which she has made a critical study of *Adavus* then and now.

I asked all three India-based teachers what traditional concepts of Bharathanatyam were being currently maintained. I wanted to see if they mentioned costume, jewellery and hand and facial gestures with special emphasis on *Adavus*. I also asked how traditional concepts of Bharathanatyam might affect the standard of the Dance form if *Adavus* are not taught correctly.

Raghupathy said *bhavam* (facial expression) is key and can only be taught to some extent, but largely, “it has to be internalized...needs experience... and it is a gift of God”. (Raghupathy, personal interview, 2020 March 4 : 4). She was of the view that while some of today’s young students were being well-groomed and taught the traditional concepts of Bharathanatyam, some others were not. She said there were some variations in *Adavus* but this was still within the realm of Bharathanatyam. “Let me give you a very simple example. Idli has rice and pulses and you grind it. You can have a variety of idli - sweet, a little potato in it or a little spice in it. But whatever, it will still be called idli. It is the same with Bharathanatyam” (Raghupathy, personal interview, 2020 March 4: 4).

Shrimati Satyabhama said the method of teaching has not changed at Kalakshetra for several decades. “Nothing has changed. The technique, the firmness, the total vigour of doing it, until today it is all still there. No doubt about it. That is why when you see a Kalakshetra Dancer, even if they are freelancing and dancing with other companies, the minute they start dancing, you can pick out the Kalakshetra Dancer.” (Satyabhama, personal interview, 2020 March 5: 5). She pointed out that students were losing out on traditional concepts at some Dance schools in India “because for some strange reason, everybody seems to think that the teaching must be done in a shorter span of time.” (Satyabhama, personal interview, 2020 March 5:9).

She did not clarify why the notion of shorter duration for study is being preferred and by whom. Possibly, increasing cost for study might also be felt by parents in India? Standards were being maintained, to a large extent in India according to her, because the audiences are more discerning and critical in India. She said: “Those who perform (in India) know that the audience that comes to watch them is aware of things - they’ve seen good performances. So, if you really present something that’s not up to mark, they might not fully approve.” (Satyabhama, personal interview, 2020 March 5: 10)

Concurring with these views, Vinod said *Adavus* are the building blocks for any movement that is to be part of any Bharathanatyam composition.

Even if it is part of abhinaya, it is the body that is communicating, so the body has to speak in a certain way, in a very structured way. The *adavu* technique is the foundation. That is why it is important – how you hold the body is as important as how you execute the *adavu* (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:1).

Vinod went on to mention that many students today find it difficult to perform *Adavus* and if one deconstructs the situation, social change also plays its part in any change. She cited *Aramandi* (the half squat position) as an example. “Earlier the lifestyle was different. One could easily squat on the ground without any difficulty because people sat on the floor to eat. They would do a lot of things in a squatting position - cooking was done like that and to bathe also was part of that routine. Everything revolved around the full squat or half squat. We have kind of given up on these practices in our urban lifestyle.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:1) I found this observation to be an astute reflection of the changing nature and impact of more sedentary lifestyles. Vinod on the other hand blamed mainly teachers and parents for incorrect *Adavus*. “Every teacher has the final say whether the pupil is ready to take on Dances. It could take months, or it could take years – it depends on when the teacher feels the student is ready.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:1) However, she said, a teacher sometimes has to prove her capacity to the outside world (community) and, therefore, rushes through the *Adavus*. Also, only *Adavus* required for particular Dance compositions were taught. “There are a lot of miscellaneous *Adavus* but because they do not come in as a regular feature in any composition, they are just forgotten. Now this is not the right way. But they are forced to do it... it is a pressure to prove oneself.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:1) She also said some parents pressurized teachers “to make sure their own child is on par with everyone in the class”. (Vinod, personal interview, 2020

November 2:2) This, she said, was irrespective of the fact that the student may not be ready and should be given a little more time. “Very often parents think their child is the absolute best. It is not wrong to think like that as a parent, but they need to also have trust in the teacher to come up with that decision – whether the child is ready to go on stage or not.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2: 2).

I had asked the interviewees whether, as most other things such as classical arts, competitive sports and even religion, sooner or later come under the spell of money-making, did they consider Bharathanatyam had fallen victim to commercialisation with teachers using the Dance form as a source of monetary gain? Have *arangetrams* become overly lavish events in order to make a profit?

When I asked Raghupathy whether Dance schools had become factories rather than a space for enculturation and spiritual awakening with their proliferation of *arangetrams*, she was nonchalant. “I know (*arangetrams*) are used to make money. That’s happening everywhere... in India, in South Africa and in America. I don’t think you should be worried about it. Paying the artist more will only give the artist lesser burden about money. If you are burdened by lack of money, the art will suffer.” (Raghupathy, personal interview, 2020 March 4: 6) She said in days gone by, the kings maintained the Dance form because they were the patrons of the arts. “But today we don’t have kings and all that. So, who will patronize Dance? We need big companies to patronize – and government too must patronize the arts.” (Raghupathy, personal interview, 2020 March 4: 6)

Shrimati Satyabhama stated that Bharathanatyam was certainly becoming a salary-earning occupation for many teachers as it is their means to a livelihood. “I have noticed that for many teachers, when either their partners are not financially strong enough to support them, or when they are single mums who are raising one or two kids, they have to rely on an additional income. When a teacher has to run a household, then teaching Dance becomes a livelihood. This is fully understandable.” (personal interview, 2020 March 5:12) She indicated that if a teacher had a conscience, large amounts of money will not be asked as *Guru dakshina* (payment to the teacher). “I have heard of people paying a lakh of rupees (R25 000) for the *arangetram*.” (personal interview, 2020 March 5: 12) She said teachers also had demands in kind over and above that. “But I come from Kalakshetra where that idea was not entertained.

When I did my *arangetram*, the only thing I did for Athai (Rukmini Devi Arundale) was give her a rose garland.” (personal interview, 2020 March 5: 12)

I pointed out that many Dance teachers had trained in India three or four decades ago. They had not gone back for refresher classes over the years. My next question was ‘Should the trainer be retrained’?

Raghupathy said teachers must upskill themselves from time to time. “Bharathanatyam teachers must have refresher courses just like doctors who must keep up-to-date with all the new drugs that come onto the market.” (Raghupathy, personal interview, 2020 March 4:8) This response confirms my hunch that there is lack of ongoing professional Dance teacher development in South Africa.

Shrimati Satyabhama was of the view that it would be very difficult to get teachers to attend refresher classes especially in South Africa. “You have people who are so entrenched in what they have been doing for so long, they may not want to change. Unless you are able to sit down and change their minds and make them understand that to be a Dancer one has to understand history, social culture and the how and why of the development of the art in that country.” (personal interview, 2020 March 5: 15)

Vinod said the teaching of any art form needs revisiting. “You must do so at a given point of time. You have been taught *alarippu* and *jatiswaram* or an entire *margam* and you move to Antarctica and start a class. You have to keep visiting your roots to see what has changed and bring it into your class. You have to keep refining, revisiting and redoing. That is the only way art will grow. Otherwise, it will be fossilised in one period of time. Otherwise, it will stagnate. Teachers must revisit and see what has changed from the time they learnt so that they can incorporate the changes.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2: 4). The concept of refreshing Dance is intended to ensure that the traditional form remains attractive and popular whilst retaining its traditional concepts.

I pointed out to my interviewees based in India that there appeared to be a lack of *baani* (a certain defined style/sub-culture/highly personalised specific way of dancing) in South Africa. When I compare the teaching style of students from India who attended certain schools in India with the teaching style of South African students who attended the same schools in India,

there is a considerable difference. I asked: Do you think it is a good thing that the *baani* is changed?

Shrimati Satyabhama said she abided by the Kalakshetra style of Dance. “I always taught like how my teachers taught me. *Baani* to me is being true to one’s roots. That does not mean that one should be stuck to anything. With the foundation intact, one can explore, experience and visualise many new things, and at the same time, be true to oneself and one’s school and training.” (personal interview, 2020 March 5:2)

Vinod said that actually, in theory, there is no *baani*. “We only have it in practice. When I as a teacher, teach my own composition, I lend my individuality and stamp in that composition that I choreograph. And that becomes my *baani*. That is my way of looking at it. If I have done a whole lot of compositions and I have a whole lot of students who are learning it over a period of time, you can see this distinct stamp in all the compositions.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2: 5) She said initially there was no *baani* as such. It was something that came about only out of necessity. She said the *nattuvanar* clan had to move to various places due to the abolition of the Devadasi system. They had to seek a new life in the urban areas of the country. And with them they took the stamp of the village where they belonged. “They wanted to create a niche for themselves. And they also printed a very unique stamp in the compositions they composed and choreographed. And that developed into a *baani*.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:2) She said it is good to have a stamp or a unique style to say that you identify yourself with that teacher or that school. “That is not wrong. It gives you a sense of identity. It comes with a definite specification of your parameters – this is what you will do or won’t do in your school.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:2) She added for one to refuse to do a certain kind of movement because it belonged to another *baani*, is wrong. “It is all movement in Bharathanatyam. You cannot say one part of the movement is alien to you. It is just that you will probably execute it in a way that is most comfortable to your style and language. But you will not do away with that movement.” (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:2). Such openness to variations with the Bharathanatyam form was refreshing to me and suggests that even if in South Africa a singular Bharathanatyam syllabus is to be agreed upon, that it too will need to be open to new ideas periodically. However, it is my view that the precepts in the syllabus must not drastically

detract from the traditional codes, thereby rendering the Dance form as a poor resemblance of its glorious heritage.

### **Interviews conducted with South African-based Dance practitioners**

Three senior Indian Dance teachers from South Africa were interviewed between April-September 2020 to share their views on the teaching of Bharathanatyam.

**Jayespri Moopen** who is the Artistic Director at Tribhangi Dance Theatre studied for five years at Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, Chennai in the late 1970s. Established in 1989, Tribhangi has boldly brought a unique combination of Indian, Contemporary, African and Afro-fusion Dance to stages locally and internationally. The company's greatest strength has been their ability to work with different Dance forms and genres and to navigate tradition to present new work that is challenging in its experimentation and unique in its presentation.

**Smeetha Maharaj** who is the Artistic Director and Principal of Nateshwar Dance Company is also the founder of the South African Indian Dance Alliance (SAIDA), an organisation established in Durban in 2016 comprising Indian Dance practitioners (including Bharathanatyam, *Kathak* and Folk) and Dance schools. SAIDA collaborates to elevate the quality and status of Indian classical and folk Dance in South Africa. Maharaj's first Dance teacher was Kumari Jayaluxmi Naidoo, with whom she studied Bharathanatyam in South Africa for a few years. She later studied *kathak* in Mumbai, India.

**Vasugi Singh** is an Indian classical Dancer, teacher and author of one of the first scholarly books in 2019 entitled "Bharathanatyam, an ancient Indian classical Dance, a journey from India to South Africa". Singh's writing follows the successful completion of a Master's degree from UKZN in 2000 where she undertook extensive research on the same topic. In 1973 Singh left for India where she studied Bharathanatyam at the Balasaraswathi School of Dance based in Chennai in the early 1970s. On her return in 1975, she introduced Indian Dance classes at the M.L. Sultan Technikon.<sup>73</sup> Subsequently the classes moved to Sastri College under the

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<sup>73</sup> It must be noted at the time Singh conducted Dance classes at ML Sultan Technikon (now the Durban University of Technology) it had predominately Indian student enrolment. This institution for Higher Education had been established with funding from an Indian benefactor Mohammed Lappa Sultan who donated funds for a technical college for Indians. By the time the student population became more ethnically mixed, Indian Dance was no longer being offered.

auspices of the Department of Education, Arts and Culture and having started with only 15 students in 1975, the school grew to 300 students and six teachers by 1992. In May 2000, Singh was the co-architect of the first historic International Indian Dance Conference (Nrittya Sannelan 2000) hosted in South Africa.

I asked all three Dance practitioners (as I had also asked the India- based teachers), what traditional concepts of Bharathanatyam were being currently maintained. I wanted to see if they mentioned costume, jewellery and hand and facial gestures with special emphasis on Adavus. I also asked how it might affect the standard of the Dance form if Adavus are not taught correctly.

Moopen said the art form travelled from India in its purist form but morphed in its new locations around the globe. She explained, "Bharathanatyam has been exported across the world and we all do it in the context of where we are. We are in Africa, the Darkest Africa, but the fact that it (Bharathanatyam) is still there and alive, it means there is still demand for it. Whichever way we teach it, the heritage is still kept alive through the Dance" (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 1) She said some years ago when it was noticed that several schools in South Africa each had their own style of *Adavus*, it was decided not to pay too much attention to chasing uniformity. This would suggest that the urgency to keep the Indian Dance form (and thus culture) alive was of greater importance than any teaching method. Moopen clarified by noting that: "It was not so important to focus on the technique. It is the only technique we know, so that's what we will teach. As it gets passed down the line, it gets diluted." (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 1)

Here it would seem Moopen acknowledges some of the challenges facing the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. She said "I find that with my students, and my graduates who teach now, with some of them it does not look like the Kalakshetra style anymore. I ask them which school does this come from, what style is this. They say Kalakshetra - and I say it isn't because it has got diluted." (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:1) It is evident that different people interpret and teach Dance in different ways. This explains how Moopen's students and other graduates dilute a style.

Moopen expanded her thoughts stating: “We can all be good Dancers but not necessarily good teachers. So that is the difference in terms of where the style is now.” (personal interview, 2020 May 3:1)

When probing her further about Bharathanatyam teaching and money-making, she said: “Schools are mushrooming simply because people see it as a lucrative business. The standard and quality of Dance leaves much to be desired.” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 2) Moopen seemed worried that standards were also low because teachers were not being true to what they are supposed to be teaching. She said: “I know there are some very well-known teachers in Durban who just want to graduate their students. They don’t know the details, the *Adavus* and what they are called, they don’t have the strong theoretical background. All they learnt is *Alarippu*, *Jathiswaram*, an abridged *Varnam*, and the other Dances in a *margam* towards a graduation. And it is very sad to see that that is what is being done. And it is no fault of the student unless they have an opportunity to make a comparison with other students and see that they have been short-changed.” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:2)

Maharaj also said that the standard was lower than it should be. She commented: “If I have to comment on the level of *Adavus* in particular, it is not anywhere near how it should be done. And teachers are letting it go too because children are not capable and dedicated enough and they just want to get it done.” (personal interview, 2020 May 7:2) But, are children today less capable of learning? What explains their lack of dedication to an art and spiritual practice? What is behind the urgency to ‘get it done’? Maharaj also said a few teachers still maintained a high standard of teaching. “I think their students are being groomed as close to tradition as possible. Time is also a challenge that teachers face. We see students once a week for one hour. How much can you teach in that time and to what depth?” (Maharaj, personal interview, 2020 May 7: 3) Maharaj recommended that classes should be more than once a week. She said teachers were also getting frustrated because students were not too passionate. She said it may be time to be more selective in who should be trained. The process of selection of a candidate or young student/‘*shisya*’ is contentious and must be understood in relation to all children’s right to learn and parents’ duty to pass down traditions and values. That only some children should learn how to pray through Dance seems highly problematic.

In Maharaj's frustration, she said: "From 10, five should be left out if they are not cut out for it. The remainder should be groomed properly." (personal interview, 2020 May 7:3)

Singh said Bharathanatyam had had a long journey to get to its current state. "You know everything in life is dynamic and the performances over time have changed drastically. Quality has taken a knock now. Students go to study Dance and have an *arangetram*. They then become teachers. And what they are teaching thereafter leaves a lot to be desired. Teachers are churning out *arangetrams* like they going out of fashion. I stopped going to *arangetrams* because it pains me to see what is going on the stage. One judges just the beautiful costume, lovely make-up, jewellery - and walk out saying 'what a lovely *arangetram*. But the performance itself, especially the *Adavus*, leaves a lot to be desired. The Aramandi is hardly ever there." (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 2)

Singh said it is a "sad state of affairs" when young Dancers themselves become teachers. (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 2) "There is no teacher training taking place." (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18:2) She said students were studying over a period of 10 years before they can finish nine items for an *arangetram*. They go part-time, mostly on a Saturday. It is only the practical work that is done – and it is only done for that particular performance where there is some polish and grace and all that. And that student moves on to become a teacher. Her concern grew when she asked: "Who has given her the permission to become a teacher? How can one become a teacher immediately after doing an *arangetram*? Who in the name of heaven tells you that you are qualified to teach dancing?" (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 2) These questions serve to point out the gaps that exist in the pedagogy whereby there is no proper validation of teachers before a student is let loose to teach other students in South Africa.

Singh deliberated over my question around the notion that like most other things such as classical arts, competitive sports and even religion, sooner or later come under the spell of money-making.

I asked all three teachers again: "Do you think Bharathanatyam has fallen victim to commercialisation with teachers using the Dance form as solely as a source of profit? Have *arangetrams* become overly lavish events?"

Moopen agreed that chasing after money dominated the teaching of Bharathanatyam. “Yes, definitely. There is no doubt about it. If you look at the list of the cost of having a graduation, it is like a big family event, like a wedding. When I had my graduation in India, it cost me nothing. Today in India, some of those arangetrams are also just as lavish.” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:4) She said when she was at Kalakshetra, the class was small - with just six students. She found that nowadays, with a small class, there is little money to be made by teachers. “It’s only when you grow the class that you make money out of it. People today have 70 to 100 in a school and have classes one day in a week. I definitely think there is a lot of commercialisation attached to it. If people have full-time jobs and are teaching on a Saturday, they should not be charging an arm and a leg. Because it should be out of the love of the art ... because they have other ways and means of earning. But you will find many who have full-time jobs and are teaching on a Saturday and are charging a lot of money for lessons.” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:5) Moopen suggested that those who were professional teachers without full-time jobs should not be expected to teach for free. “You had to go to India and learn the Dance form. You or your parents had to pay for it. So why should you not charge?” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 5) She added it was fine to charge for teaching because “learning Dance is a luxury; it is not a necessity. But the commercialisation dilutes the reason why you are teaching”. (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:5) I was intrigued by her remark “[Dance] is not a necessity”. (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:5) As for me the learning of Bharathanatyam is a path to Godliness and central to life.

Maharaj said: “I think the older teachers were the genuine ones - you could see dedication and they spent extra hours with the students.” (Maharaj, personal interview, 2020 May 7: 4) She said she also spent more time with her students many years ago, but she cannot do that presently because the class sizes have increased. She gave the example of a school in Phoenix where the teacher has hundreds of students. “From a social point of view, given the area where the students come from, it is okay that they attend the Dance school because they are in a better place. But there is no quality teaching.” (Maharaj, personal interview, 2020 May 7: 4) Maharaj was referring to learners choosing Dance as a form of escape from the social ills that were prevalent in the sprawling township of Phoenix. The lack of quality teaching was in reference to rushed teaching conducted by the teacher who focused more on the *Arangetram*

rather than the quality of learning that the student imbibed. She said this teacher was having *Arangetrams* for students who were about 14 years of age. And then these students opened their own schools. “How can you make young girls become teachers. It is happening with so many of them. There is no depth in what they are doing.” (Maharaj, personal interview, 2020 May 7:4) Learners are taught the basics in a rushed manner and no attention is paid to finer details.

Singh said Bharathanatyam in South Africa had become highly commercialised. “Everybody wants to be a *Guru* and it is surprising sometimes how young this little *Guru* is. And how much of learning has really taken place? You are a child yourself. You haven’t learnt beyond eight, nine items. And you have done it so robot-like. And now you teaching. So that student of a teacher of that calibre performs *Arangetram* again.” (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 4) While a learner is taught between 6-8 items for an *Arangetram*, the learner should have also learnt scores of items which expand the Dance repertoire. Instead, they are familiar only with the items for their *Arangetram*.

An exasperated Singh noted: “But what kind of *arangetram* is coming through? From a child who taught a child? There is no knowledge of music, there is no knowledge of *nattuvangam*, there is no knowledge of anything.” (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 2) She said young students merely aped what they were taught without any proper understanding of the Dance. “And our community (Indian) doesn’t know any better.” (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 3) She said younger parents want the child to rush and finish the *arangetram* before going to university. “Because once you go to university, you in your career path and you have no time to learn Bharathanatyam now. Yeah, that is what’s happening now.” (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18: 3) Singh’s comments resonate with statements made by children I interviewed (which can be found the end of this chapter).

I pointed out that many Dance teachers had trained in India three or four decades ago. They had not gone back for refresher classes over the years. My final question was: Should the trainer be retrained?

Moopen is of the view that training in Dance does not end as soon as you graduate (have an *arangetram*). “There is a perception out there that as soon as I graduate, I will open a school.

But I have a full-time job where I am earning a salary but I will have classes on a Saturday just to earn more money. A lot of them are doing it in Jo'burg." (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3:5) She said she had undergone retraining on several occasions. "I have reconnected over the years with friends just to keep in touch. Refresher training is important. It is good for you as a teacher so you can inspire the generations to come. Children are exposed to so many other things on a daily basis and also take up learning to Dance. If children can be interested in the arts, it is important for us as teachers to also get our ducks in a row and make sure we know what we are talking about when we are teaching. I know a lot of Dancers who go to India quite often for refresher courses." (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 5)

Maharaj said teachers should be retrained from time to time because not everyone is a teacher. "You may be a Dancer but also want to teach. But not everybody is cut out to teach. How you get across to students and how you get it out of them, is something else. Hence, by attending classes especially for teachers, they can be taught the finer points of teaching. We should have a teachers' forum where best practice is discussed and teachers are retrained." (Maharaj, personal interview, 2020 May 7:4) Maharaj makes a good case for teachers to have certain attributes more than just an ability to Dance. They must be able to teach; get concepts through to students and draw the best out of them.

Singh said many teachers did not have the means to go back to India to retrain. Fortunately for her, she also studied for a Bachelor of Pedagogics degree over four years and this instilled teaching skills in her. "Unfortunately, In South Africa we do not have any institution to train Bharathanatyam teachers." (Singh, personal interview, 2020 September 18:4) From the data it is clear that there is a great need for awareness of Bharatanatyam as more than a Dance form, more discussion of its role for all South Africans both diasporic and indigenous, and more questions around the institutionalisation of Indian Dance, including teacher training.

### **A synthesis of the data from the six interviews**

I had discussed with the three interviewees in India that there appeared to be a lack of *baani* in South Africa. I thus asked the South African interviewees as well: Do you think it is a good thing that the *baani* is changed?

Moopen said we often look to India as the place where people are maintaining a high standard of Dance. However, in her view, there was a better standard in the US and UK where people are able to maintain the original style through their students. “When I first started, I was very strict about the style and then I realised that along the line I should have a different way of teaching it. I did not adapt the style. I just found a different way of teaching it. It is just a method of teaching that you change. You do not change the style because you do not have that right. You look at ways and means of imparting the style in a way that it will be accepted (by discerning critics).” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 2)

Maharaj said the essence of the Dance must be retained. “You don’t take the form and change the essence of the actual thing. You can present it in a more interesting way, without changing the form. We should still be pure.” (Maharaj, personal interview, 2020 May 7: 3) To ensure the *baani* was retained, she regularly checked back with her Gurus in India who would not hesitate to correct her if there were any deviations from the original. In our interview, I then questioned the importance of a sound knowledge of music to Bharathanatyam. Some of the Dance teachers - especially those based in India - stressed the importance of having a knowledge of music for Bharathanatyam. I asked the South African teachers their views on this specific issue.

Moopen said she had to study music while taking Dance classes in India. It was the only way one could understand the meaning of a Dance. “When we were taught, we had to make sense of everything. We had a very strong musical background. We had to learn music and the theory of music. Because that is very important to be able to tell those stories. We don’t just Dance the stories of the Gods.” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020 May 3: 2) Moopen was pointing out that the Dance movements had to be meaningful and in order to grasp the meaning, you had to understand the song and music that accompanied the Dance.

I noted that Shrimati Satyabhama had said that side-by-side with Dance classes at Kalakshetra, she also studied music. Her *Guru* and founder of Kalakshetra, Rukmini Devi, made it clear that Dance and music went together. “She used to say that you must never think that music is separate, and you are separate. It is for that music you are dancing. It is that poetry you are visually exhibiting as a Dance. First you must learn to appreciate that music. Then you must have some knowledge of the music. She would always say we must be able to sing, not to

become a singer, but to be able to better understand the Dance. You must understand the music, love it, and then express it through Dance.” (personal interview, 2020 March 5: 2)

The participants in the interviews generally agreed on the following: that there was a need for longer teaching; some felt that only a select few should even be permitted to join a Dance class and that a kind of selection process may be needed. The dedication and passion of the child was another concern which they shared. All interviewees agreed that commercial considerations have come into play in new ways with some stating that for some teachers, providing instruction in Bharathanatyam was a source of income or livelihood. All seemed to detest the monetary exploitation that seems to surround arangetrams today with some pointing out it is unethical. One of the interviewees signalled a need for some kind of institution for Bharathanatyam in South Africa. And no one suggested what such a programme should look like. All agreed that the need for teacher refresher courses was great but that challenges were present in terms of cost. There was no agreement on whether refresher courses should be in India only or whether they could be elsewhere e.g., in US or UK, or even in South Africa.

Based on my personal experience of undergoing training both in Durban and Chennai and noticing the differences in teaching in both centres, as mentioned in the previous chapter, I assessed the teaching in keeping with *Parampara*<sup>74</sup> (traditional) form. It must be pointed out that it was not my intention to evaluate and rank the teaching of Bharathanatyam in Durban and Chennai; it was intended to conduct an assessment with the aim of understanding, first, what was taking place in each space, and second, the impact of the teaching methods as choices that were being made by teachers. My question was what might new forms of teaching and learning Bharathanatyam look like that could satisfy the demands of the *Parampara* form.

In order to compare like with like, I attempted to select teachers in Chennai and Durban who shared common teachers. In this final section of the chapter, I turn to two specific Dance classes conducted for children in Chennai and Durban. Whilst much occurs in every class, I will analyse the transference of knowledge to pupils and offer a critique of the selected teaching methodology.

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<sup>74</sup> Tradition passed on over generations



## Critical analysis of Bharathanatyam Dance classes

In my research I wanted to understand the causes of the disparity in teaching of Bharathanatyam in Chennai, and Durban. In order to do this, it was necessary for me to observe classes in both these sites. Three classes from three schools with pupils of different ages, were chosen in Chennai and Durban. I observed a single lesson in each class. A point to note is that for each class in Chennai, a teacher from the same lineage (*baani*) was chosen in Durban. I attended six classes in total.

It must be emphasised that with consent from the teachers, I embarked on the exercise of observing the learning and teaching in both sites. During my frequent visits to India, I experienced a different type of teaching in Chennai, than in Durban. In fact, it was that variance that suggested to me that I should probe the situation more thoroughly. Is there a drop in standards of teaching this art form within a few decades? I return to my central question: What explains the shifts in pedagogy of Bharathanatyam in South Africa?

I divided my task of observation into two areas. First, I looked at the content of the class (*what was actually being taught*) and second, the teacher's overall teaching methodology (*how this content was being delivered*). I looked at a singular aspect of the content i.e., *Adavus*, because these are frequently the basic/foundation steps of Bharathanatyam and could indicate what was the particular style of teaching (the *baani*). As mentioned by Vinod, the style (*baani*) of *Adavus* should be maintained. In her own words, "Sometimes, the teacher will change something slightly to suit the pupil. Even so, the style will not change. The external form may change slightly. I have very short arms. I was always told to stretch out more. This just makes it look good on the frame of the person. Execution will change... but this will not change the style." (Vinod, personal interview, 2020 November 2:3)

*Adavus* are the building blocks or foundation steps of Bharathanatyam. You cannot write a book if you do not know the alphabets, words and grammatical construction of sentences. *Adavus* are comprised of steps of the feet and arm movements in various positions, performed to various rhythmic beats and at varying speeds. In this sense its variety is much like words/vocabulary that becomes a text and later a poem. Many teachers have asked me to teach their pupils *Adavus* and this may so because I have had recent access to renowned teachers in Chennai. *Adavus* stress the body lines (*angasuddha*) aspect and also emphasize

grace and softness required when it is being executed. *Adavus* also involve facial expression. They include feet positions, stamping, postures of the body and hand gestures.

In the next section I will unpack *Adavu* teaching in classes in Chennai and Durban

***Case Study One: (Sreedevi Priya and Manormani Govender) - Indra Rajen lineage***

The pupils in Chennai commenced classes with a three-minute yoga session, comprising stretching exercises. This was not the case with the students in Durban. This act of warm-up exercises prepares the limbs for the strenuous movements and poses that are to follow. Thereafter, I looked at the standing posture of the children both in Chennai and Durban.



**Image 3: Manormani Govender (Durban) holding her wrist in Kathakamukha pose, similar to the learner in Sreedevi Priya class (Chennai). Pictures provided by author**

There was strong similarity in the positions of the hands. What was striking is that the teacher in Durban and the pupils in Chennai flexed their wrists in similar fashion, showing that the Manormani Govender and Sreedevi Priya were still loyal to the style imbibed in them by their common teacher Indra Rajen. Both teachers in Chennai and Durban, adhered to a disciplined, no-nonsense style of getting the students to abide by dress codes.

What was glaringly obvious in terms of pupil involvement in Durban, was that while the Chennai pupils appeared to be fully immersed in the movements of the *Adavus*, with their body language showing the connect between mind and body, this was sorely lacking in their Durban counterparts who appeared to go through the physical motions without emotional

connections. There was good body posture and *Aramandi*,<sup>75</sup> mostly evident in both centres, however, in the Durban class there were instances when the arms became loose. Overall, the Durban class was of a similar standard when compared to the same level of class in Chennai, and this may be attributable to the dedication of the Durban teacher who is one of the few in South Africa who is known for her non-commercial interest. This teacher stands apart from most others in Durban, in terms of her dedication to her pupils. Her lessons were well articulated and she was empathetic. She demonstrated arm and hand gestures involving herself closely with the pupils in her class. It was also noteworthy that she helped her pupils keep the rhythmic beat with a *nattavangum*.<sup>76</sup> The Chennai teacher was equally involved in teaching arm and leg movements to her pupils. She helped them to keep a beat with a *tattakazhi*<sup>77</sup>. The teaching of the *dit diet thai adavu* (between pupils at both centres) was conducted according to the laid down aesthetics of their *baani*, carrying on from their teacher, Indra Rajen. This is an indication the Durban and Chennai classes in Case Study One both maintain aspects of the *Indra Rajen baani* or lineage.

### ***Case Study Two: (Uma Anand and Kantharuby Munsamy) – KN Dandayudhapani Lineage***

The Durban class appeared to be overly-managed by the teacher who seemed intent on creating a good impression because the class was being observed by a visiting critic. The interaction between the pupils and the teacher clearly demonstrated that the pupils had been prepared in advance to execute a specific *Adavu*. The pupils did not perform the invocation prayer<sup>78</sup> on their own, and the teacher reminded them of the process that had to be followed. This was not the case in the Chennai class which performed the invocation prayer which lasts less than a minute without any prompting. Further, in the Chennai class, there were clean and clear hand gestures, for example the *alapadma* (open flower) hand gesture, whereas in the Durban class, elbow and wrist gestures were limp and untidy.

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<sup>75</sup> Known as the plie in Ballet. *Ara* referring to half and *mandi* referring to knees.

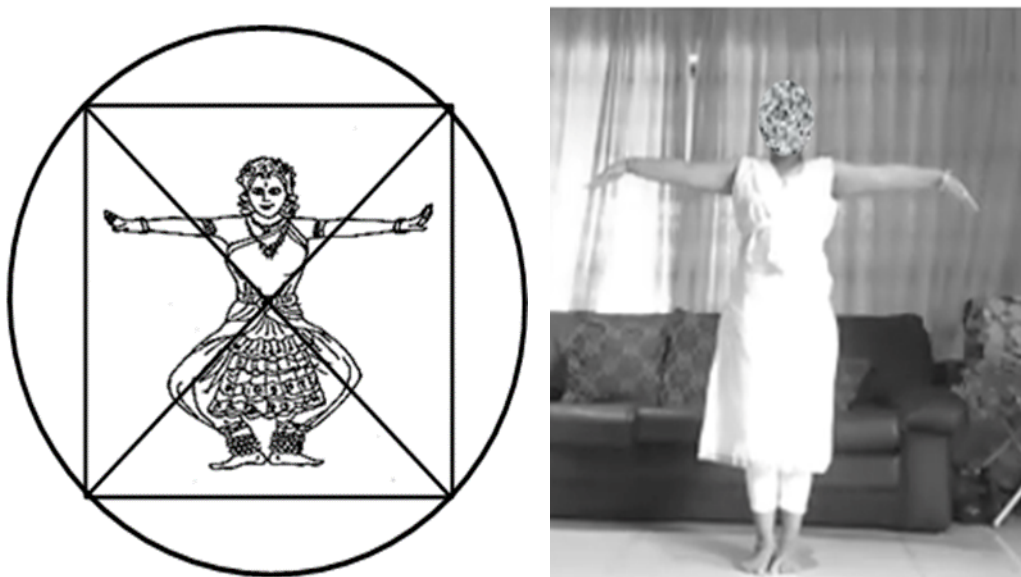
<sup>76</sup> Cymbal.

<sup>77</sup> The teacher strikes *thalam* on a *tattakazhi* (a wooden block that is banged with a stick).

<sup>78</sup> Known as the Namsaskaram done at the start and conclusion of each class or performance, the prayer comprises a set of hand gestures through which the Dancer appeals for forgiveness for stamping on the ground. This prayer also invokes of a higher power for a successful performance.

Like the teacher in Chennai, the Durban teacher made the pupils perform each *Adavu* in three speeds and was clear in reciting the *sollakattus*<sup>79</sup> for the pupils, a trait which can be linked to KN Dandayadapani Pillai penchant for recitation of *sollakattus*. In the Chennai class the *sollakattus*, were also recited for each *Adavu*. The recitation of *solakkatus* is a rarity in the majority of Durban Bharathanatyam classes as this is not regarded as vital to the pupils' growth. The *tatta* and *natta Adavus* (first and second group of *Adavus*) were performed mechanically by the Durban class; they tried to follow the beat of the *tattakazhi* kept by the teacher, but failed to keep this beat when it came to the third speed and their footwork became clumsy.

In the Chennai class, the *Natyarambam*<sup>80</sup> posture was held with a half-squat *Aramandi* whereas in the Durban class the *Aramandi* was lost with straightened legs and the *Natyarambam* was inadequate. It is critical that any postural imperfections of younger students are corrected timeously before bad habits become ingrained.



**Image 4: On the left is the correct posture of *natyarambam*; on the right the hands are in the wrong position and there is no *Aramandi***

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<sup>79</sup> These are syllables recited when one learns *Adavus*. These syllables are usually kept to *thalam* (*time*). It denotes retention of the notes for the beats

<sup>80</sup> The *Natyarambam* posture is kept throughout Bharathanatyam movements – it keeps the body balanced and is intended to be symmetrical.

The students' lacked concentration in dancing in the Durban class. Pupils were fidgety, constantly adjusting their *punjabis*<sup>81</sup> and would be distracted by other activities in the room, whereas in the Chennai class the teacher had total control of the minds and bodies of the children by not tolerating distraction, and the children were fully focussed on the teacher giving their total concentration to the Dance movements.

In Chennai, learning the Dance is something that the child naturally tends to want to follow after being exposed to Bharathanatyam in the form of recitals at temples, halls and school. In some Indian schools, it also forms part of the curriculum. However, in South Africa many children are forced by their parents to learn the Dance (refer to chapter 3). There is not widespread knowledge of Bharatanatyam. Learning this deeply-embedded cultural form and practice may seem old-fashioned to some South African children and youth today.

An interesting point to note is that an aspect of dance performativity that the Durban teacher shares with her *Guru* KN Dhandayudhapani, is the fondness to stage epic dramas on a major scale on stage. This too, is a scarce phenomenon among many Durban Bharathanatyam dance schools because of the enormous time resources and energy that such performances demand.

### ***Case Study Three: (Priya Murle and Yogambal Singaram) – NV Nagarajan Lineage***

The Durban class has a 40-decade reputation of schooling pupils in pure Bharathanatyam that does not fuse with dances from foreign cultures. Hence, it came as surprise that a basic ritual such as the invocation prayer had to be guided by the teacher. I would like to think that it was more a case of the children lacking in confidence as a strange visitor was present rather than the pupils not being able to go through the motions on their own. Perhaps, continuous attention to the prayer should be given. In the Chennai class the pupils assembled and offered the prayer confidently. Another question that arose for me was whether the South African teachers sufficiently explained nowadays why a prayer is required as part of Bharathanatyam practice?

I also observed that while the Chennai teacher made her pupils sit in *Aramandi* for 25 counts and also gave them warm-up exercises, this was not done by the Durban pupils in the class I attended. In the Durban class, the students' physique did not seem to be sufficiently attuned

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<sup>81</sup> Outfit, made up of a shawl, long top and loose-fitting pants, are worn when learning Dance.

to learning Bharathanatyam. Hand movements were not reflecting the *Asamyukta hastas* (single hand gestures). For example, when I asked the Durban pupils to recite the *Asamyukta hastas*, one pupil could not recite any and another mentioned only a few. When I asked the teacher why this was the case, she stated that the child was 'too shy' to perform. It must be noted that *Hastas* are integral to Bharathanatyam in the foundational phase of their learning.

Inconsistency reflected in the *Aramandi* in the Durban class whilst performing the *Adavus*. In comparison, the Chennai class displayed clear arm and leg lines, and hand gestures. The *Aramandi* that the Chennai children held was extremely commendable. For example, in the 30-minute class the teacher reminded the children to '*ukarange*<sup>82</sup>' in *Aramandi* not more than three times. But in the Durban class, the teacher had to constantly beg the children to sit in *Aramandi*. NV Nagarajan who imparted knowledge both the Chennai and Durban teachers, was reputed to have placed emphasis on the *Aramandi* being performed to perfection. The Chennai teacher told me that he would instruct his pupils to 'stick the buttocks and stomach in'. Has this key issue been forgotten? Is this what is changing the appearance of Bharathanatyam today? There is scope for further enquiry.

To illustrate the issue of shifts in Bharathanatyam further, at the *Natya Darshan* conference held in Chennai from 20-22 December 2019, two sessions titled 'Interactive *Adavus*' formed part of the morning lecture-demonstrations. On 21 December, Sasirekha Balasubramanium and Sri A Lakshmanan gave a presentation on the *Tanjore Baani*, looking at the work of Kittapa Pillai. Balasubramanium spoke about important aspects that are maintained within this *baani* such as '*Bramasuma*' which is the art of keeping the balance/symmetry of the body. Balasubramanium maintained that the strong activation of the core/centre of the body is necessary in order to bring about a good *Aramandi*. A Lakshmanan agreed that *Aramandi* has to be done in such a way that your body becomes conditioned to it, to the point that the *adavu* sits well with your body. He noted "tuck the bum in, weight is to be placed on thighs and not knees." Geometry plays a key role too which can be noticed by observing in what direction the Dancer is facing when in a fully aligned *Aramandi*.

When it came to *Adavus*, some students in the Durban class appeared to be doing the steps for the first time. They would often stop and look blankly at the teacher. Clearly embarrassed

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<sup>82</sup> Means sit in *Tamil*.

that the pupil had forgotten such a basic step, the teacher explained that they had forgotten it because there had been some time since they were taught this step, clearly pointing to a need for more frequent lessons. This gap or infrequency of Dance lessons seems to be a recurring issue which the three South African interviewees and the three Chennai interviewees commented upon. The lack of regular classes or classes more than once a week seems to be a central issue in the attempt to better impart such a complex art form and spiritual practice.

The Chennai teacher made use of a *tattakazhi* and when she asked the children to recite the *thalam* of specific *Adavus*, they were confident in reciting it. They appeared to perform it effortlessly. On the day I observed, the Durban teacher did not use a *tattakazhi* she kept the beat by clapping her hands every now and then. The rhythmic pattern of music is another area that must be taught to young children and in Chennai was taught through repetition or mimicry. The *Kudithamitha adavu (thai ya thai he)* where the main step is jumping on the toe and heel is an important aspect of this hereditary style. NV Nagarajan apparently said when the feet are properly positioned, they must outline the shape of the temple *gopuram*.<sup>83</sup> The shape of a *gopuram* was less evident in the pupils' footwork in Durban class in comparison to the shape of the *gopuram* by the students in Chennai.

One could argue that the visible presence of thousands of temples in India are part of the everyday experience of the pupils in Chennai whereas for pupils in South Africa such temples are only a handful. How can South African teachers address this? Could the use of vibrant, large charts, colourful videos and site visits to the few temples that do exist in South Africa, make a difference?

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<sup>83</sup> The highest point of the temple top.



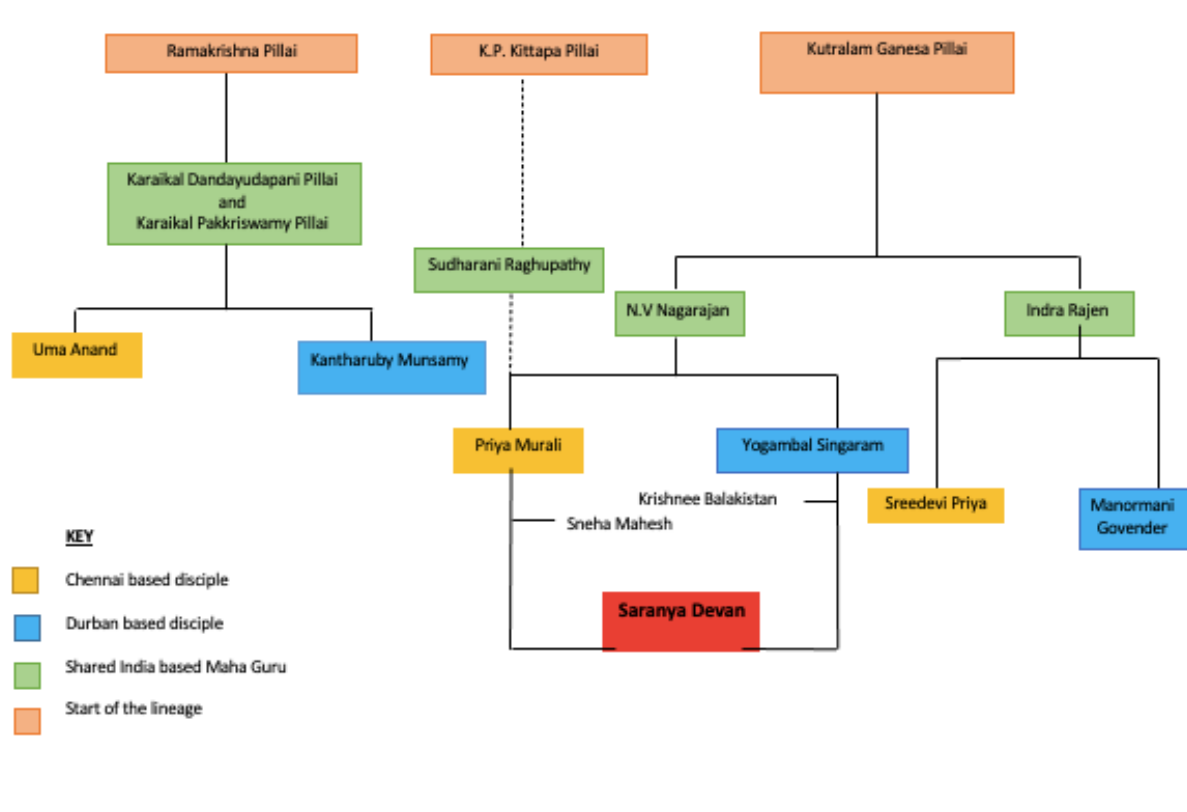
**Image 5: Illustration from Sunil Kothari's book Bharathanatyam of Dancer in toe heel position. Focus on the positioning of the feet. N.V. Nagarajan pushed his students to create the shape of the gopuram of the temple. Photographer: unknown**

### **A discussion of *baani* from case studies: One tree, many branches**

When I went into this research study, I chose three teachers in Durban and three in Chennai who had shared the same teachers. I wanted to access whether there were three distinctive *Baanis*. The objective was to see how strongly the *baani* was retained between Chennai and Durban, despite the passage of time. As I delved deeper into tracing the lineage, I discovered an interesting coincidence. Contrary to my belief that there were three distinct *Baanis*, each connecting a Chennai and Durban teacher, it emerged that the Chennai and Durban teachers were all off-shoots off various Gurus who were strongly influenced by one *baani*, Pandanallur/Tanjore *baani*. It thus follows that the teachers in Chennai and Durban all came from a common fountain.

As illustrated in Image 6, Ramakrishna Pillai taught his grandsons KN Dandayudhapani Pillai and KN Pakkriswamy Pillai. KN Dandayudhapani Pillai came under the Pandanallur/Tanjore influence when he when he worked at Kalakshetra together with Meenakshisundaram Pillai (forerunner of the Pandanallur/Tanjore *baani*) and other Pandanallur/Tanjore *baani* stalwarts, Chokkalingam Pillai and Muthukumar Pillai. Uma Anand learnt from her father KN Dandayudhapani Pillai and Kantharuby Munsamy learnt from both KN Pakkriswamy Pillai and

KN Dandayudhapani Pillai. NV Nagarajan and Indra Rajen were both disciples of Kutralam Ganesa Pillai who was shaped in the Pandanallur/Tanjore *baani*. As stated in chapter 4, NV Nagarajan assisted Professor Sudharani Raghupathy with teaching her pupils *Adavus*, one of them being Priya Murle. It is noteworthy that Sudharani Raghupathy is a direct disciple of KP Kittapa Pillai, who is a blood-relative of the famous Tanjore Quartet<sup>84</sup>. Yogambal Singaram is a direct disciple of NV Nagarajan. Manormani Govender and Sreedevi Priya are direct disciples of Indra Rajen.



**Image 6: A Genealogy of selected Bharathanatyam teachers in Chennai and Durban, showing how the Pandanallur/Tanjore Baani branched out**

So, in essence, the Pandanallur/Tanjore *baani* was one trunk that divided into many branches. While the Pandanallur/Tanjore off-shoots in Chennai all bear similar resemblance in form, this

<sup>84</sup> "It is generally believed that the technique of Bharata Natyam which was earlier known as *Sadir*, and its repertoire from *alarippu* to *tillana*, with which we are today familiar were given a formal shape by the four famous *nattuvanars*, choreographers, and musicians, Chinnaya, Ponnayya, Shivanandam and Vadivelu" (Kothari, 2007:144)

is not entirely the case with the South African saplings which have adopted their own characteristics.

### **A discussion of the children's voices: Why I learn to Dance?**

It must be noted that permission to interview and quote the children from the different Dance classes was sought from and granted by the different teachers in the form of signed consent forms. However, I have chosen not to mention the children by name as they were minors.

At the end of each class, I asked the children - all girls - in the classes in Chennai and in Durban why they were learning to Dance. The majority of their responses pointed to two key responses: 1) parents wanting their children to have a connection with their Indian culture and 2) "to be Godly" as quite a few children confirmed this. A child in Durban said "I learn dancing to stay fit. It's great for fitness." I wondered how she might have attached the separate notions of fitness and Dance. Was she influenced by her older siblings? Or pupils at English school, or television or films and the wider social media?

An eight-year-old in Durban said "my mom liked Indian Dance and I learn dancing for my mom." Why does she want to 'learn for' or to please her mother in this way? How is respect for her parents and elders being shown? A nine-year old in Chennai said "all the woman in her family had learnt Bharathanatyam and she was not prepared to break the trend". And a 12-year-old in Durban told me, "because it's my culture, and my parents want me to learn it to be closer to my culture". Such replies made me ask: "What do these pre-adolescents know what culture is?" Where does their compliance with their parents' views in this particular circumstance come from? An 11-year-old in Chennai said: "I watched Dance performances with my family and told my parents that I like to learn to Dance; the next day they enrolled me for my first class." This seemed reactionary on the part of parents or was a great relief that the child was embracing their culture? A 10-year-old in Durban declared: "I like to learn Dance because my teacher is really nice and makes class fun." And a seven-year-old in Durban remarked: "I like dressing up and wearing all the fancy costumes and jewellery." What was this response evidencing in terms of a commitment to Bharathanatyam as a spiritual practice? And finally, an eight-year-old child in Durban claimed: "I learn dancing because I make lots of friends." I wondered whether these friends were 'non-family members'/outsiders? None of

them commented on older siblings which made me reflect on the generational nature, and family groups that used to study Bharathanatyam.

From an initial overview of the responses of the children in Durban it is evident that they did not choose to learn the Dance out of their own volition but rather at the behest of their parents. The children would appear to have been more attracted to the ornamental aspects of Bharathanatyam rather than the pedagogical aesthetics. This may explain why there is an absence of personal commitment. I can accept that so much more needs to be unpacked here but include it here as an indication of future directions of this field of study.

Many in the current younger generation of Indians see no usefulness in the languages of their forebears. Hence, there is almost no spoken *Tamil, Hindi or Telugu*. The *sari* and *salwar* have been replaced by western outfits. The casserole now shares popularity with curry in many Indian kitchens across South Africa. Likewise, an Indian art form such as Bharathanatyam is frowned upon by younger parents who see it as “too Indian” in a country that seeks to espouse an African cultural ethos. My study is born in Africa; it is a child of Africa; hence, it is prudent that Bharathanatyam in South Africa is located within the African context. Bharathanatyam practitioners in South Africa must take a stand concerning their own identity as Africans and their relation to African Dance. An unpacking of challenges confronting the teaching of traditional African Dance in a modern and contemporary world have already been undertaken by researchers such as Lliane Loots (2012), Gerard M. Samuel (2011), Maxwell Xolani Rani (2012), Gregory Maqoma (2011) and Clare Craighead (2006) amongst others. They comment on the problematics for retaining Africinity whilst borrowing from other Dance traditions. Cultural expert and author Ayoko Mensah (in Sergeit 2010) stresses how important it is today for African artists to free themselves from the dependency of a conceived Africinity and to set their often intercultural-shaped biography as a starting point for their own work. She claims that: “A new generation refuses the corset of a rigid and fictitious ‘Africinity’. As children of globalisation these artists in same measure feel as citizens of the world and African, and they accordingly claim on universality.” (Mensah in Sergeit, 2010) What is the role of Bharathanatyam in a post-colonial era?

While I have not concealed my personal preference for *parampara* - a succession of teachers and disciples in traditional Indian culture - I have also attempted to question whether there is

justification for Bharathanatyam to exist in a traditional form outside the immediate social, political and cultural context of its origin. There is scope for further research on how Bharathanatyam should accommodate national, diasporic and multicultural identities in South Africa. In a sea of Africanism, can a droplet of that “authentic” or “pure” Indian Dance art called Bharathanatyam, founded on some ancient Indian dramaturgical treatise such as the *Natyashastra* or the *Abhinaya Darpana*, be expected to survive in the modern world, untouched without adulteration?

If we want “true Indian tradition” of the performing arts, untainted by modernity, then we must be prepared to redefine the boundaries of traditional heritage and modern innovation. Moopen was clear in her interview with me: “We are in Africa ... the Darkest Africa ... but the fact that it (Bharathanatyam) is still there and alive, it means there is still demand for it. Whichever way we teach it ... there appears to be less focus on the techniques ... whether we doing the right *Adavu* or sitting enough in *Aramandi* ... as it gets passed down the line, it gets diluted ... not every one of us can be good teachers.” (Moopen, personal interview, 2020, May 3). Moopen’s comment is worrisome for those who wish to keep a narrow line from *Guru* to student that is undiluted. Moopen continues to maintain that:

The standard and quality of Dance leaves much to be desired. You (must) look at ways and means of imparting the style in a way that it will be accepted. You will need to teach it because there is a demand and people really want to learn it...but you can’t teach it the way you learnt it. As much as the Dance is evolving in different shapes and leaps, if you do not have a strong grounding of what you know of the style, you really going to short-change yourself. The foundation is very important. (Moopen, personal interview, 2020, May 3)

Moopen’s desire to remain as close as she can to the traditional form is clearly evident. However, I still wondered, is enough effort being put into traditional methods of teaching Bharathanatyam? Maharaj summed it up:

If I have to comment on the level of *Adavus* in particular ... the level at which they perform is not anywhere near how it should be done. And teachers are letting it go too because children are not capable and dedicated enough and they just want to get it done. I don’t know what you can put it down to ... whether we as teachers are getting frustrated teaching students who are not so passionate? The question also comes ... do we take 10 students ...

and say five or six from the 10 are not cut out for it and just take the other three or four and let them master it and groom them properly. But we are trying to at the same time to maintain interest in culture and make sure it is going forward ... and make sure more people are learning it. (Moopen, personal interview, 2020, May 7)

It is evident that Maharaj remains conflicted between the tensions of modernity and a desire to pass down traditions. This made me ask: Does Bharathanatyam need overhauling? Is there a need for a recognised institution to guide the standards of teaching and learning? Singh had said:

Quality has taken a knock now ... the end result is just the *arangetram* ... and from the *arangetram* they become Dance teachers ... and what they are teaching thereafter leaves a lot to be desired ... teachers are churning out *arangetrams* like they going out of fashion. I stopped going to *arangetrams* because it pains me to see what is going on the stage. One judges just the beautiful costume, lovely make-up, jewellery and beautiful picture ... and walk out saying “what a lovely *arangetram*”. But the performance itself ... you look at the *Adavus* ... if you talk of the *Adavus* being the basic ... leaves a lot to be desired ... the *Aramandi* is hardly ever there. Right ... so, I am just saying it is a sad state of affairs ... when young Dancers themselves ... become teachers when there is no teacher-training taking place (Singh, personal interview, 2020, September 18).

### **A private reflection: my unlearning and relearning of Bharathanatyam**

While observing the Dance classes I could not but reflect on the painful journey I had to undergo commencing many years ago, when as a young girl of 10 years old, I was forthrightly forced to abandon my ‘incorrect’ posture and gestures that I had learnt in Durban and to replace them with ‘correct’ movements from the gurus in India. What stands out for me is that at my first meeting with the renowned Adyar Lakshmanan Sir, I was asked by him to perform a few *Adavus*. Soon after I commenced, he promptly stopped me and advised that my *Natyarambam* needed to be corrected. Since old habits die hard, it took some practice to correct the wrong arm position to conform to what was regarded as perfect. On subsequent short trips to India, I would be corrected many times for bad posture and clumsy placement of *Adavus*.



**Image 7: The author undergoes intensive correction to her posture in a Dance class in Chennai 2007. Photograph: Author's Private Collection.**

My basic steps had never been corrected in Durban and I was allowed to progress to the Dance repertoire, yet whenever I went back to India, I had to spend time working on basic steps and this together with children far younger than me. I felt embarrassed and humiliated. I could have easily continued progressing through the various items for a *margam* in Durban and would have had my *arangetram* years ago. However, deep inside me, I knew that what I had been taught and what I learnt fell far short of the required standard, the aesthetics and values of reputable schools in Chennai. Hence, I put my *arangetram* on hold and commenced lessons in Chennai. This involved unlearning and relearning the *Adavus* over an eight-month period since 2019. There is a physical and emotional impact to this process especially when as an adult in your 20s, you have to take baby steps. However, Dance is more than meaningless movements for me and this small sacrifice is worth the goal of knowing much more deeply the history, the music, the divine shlokas, the subtle abhinayas that are central to Bharathanatyam. My postures and gestures will conform to a standard in keeping with such traditional guidelines and thus, any shame of having to unlearn steps and to condition my mature limbs would have been worth all the effort. I now know that I possess a technique that is true to the birthplace of this Dance form and practice.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, following my analysis of classes, performances, teachers and the whole experience of this study, I attempt to consolidate my key findings and

suggest some recommendations on how the standard of the teaching and learning of Bharathanatyam in Durban (and perhaps South Africa) may be improved.

## CHAPTER SIX — *PADAM*

In the previous chapters, several issues had been identified that describe and interpret the shifting practices in the teaching of Bharathanatyam in South Africa. In this last chapter I will discuss my key findings which include: gaps in teaching practice, a gravitation towards the commercialisation of Bharathanatyam and specifically the role of the arangetram. Other issues that emerged from the study itself include the need for ongoing professional development of teachers and what form refresher programmes could take.

### Gaps in the Teaching Practice

The most visible gaps in Teaching Practice of Bharathanatyam in South Africa appear to stem from first, the frequency (or rather infrequency) of classes, and second, the lackadaisical attitude of students. Interviewees bemoaned the fact that too short and too few classes were held each week. A too casual relationship with the tasks set out by teachers was expressed as a lack of dedication and passion for culture, in summary, *Bhakti*.

Interviewees noted that currently, any Bharathanatyam Dancer in South Africa who has learnt some aspects of the Dance for perhaps two to four years and has performed an “instant” *arangetram*, can announce herself as a qualified teacher - even at the tender age of 15 or 16. This was confirmed several times by Singh, Govender and Maharaj during interviews with these respected South African Dance practitioners. Can such a relatively young and inexperienced facilitator of knowledge realistically call herself/himself a “*Guru*”? For me the answer is a resounding NO since a *Guru* is someone who is placed alongside God on the pedestal and should have the stature of a parent. Such is the adulation for the *Guru* that there is a popular Sanskrit adage “*Matha Pitha Guru Deivam*” which translated means, “Mother Father Teacher God”.<sup>85</sup>The teacher comes before God.

Many teachers including Smeetha Maharaj and Shrimati Satyabhama complain that the youth of today, both in South Africa and India, lack *Bhakti* (devotion to, or faith in, God or an activity such as Dance). Why do some young people today appear to be anti-spiritual? What is their

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<sup>85</sup> The meaning of this phrase is the order in which one should offer reverence. First comes the mother (*Matha* or *Mata*) who gives birth to the child, next comes the father (*Pitha* or *Pita*), because it is the mother who knows the truth about the father and she points us to the father. The mother and father then takes us to the teacher (*Guru*), and it is the *guru*, through his or her teachings, who points us to God (*Deivam* or *Devam*).

new religion and devotion? Is this contemporary devotion defined in terms of the materialistic, wealth and power that stems from the west? Is this a global phenomenon? I believe that the problem is that *Bhakti* is perceived as outmoded as children seem to worship at the altar of capitalist consumption manifest in play stations, iPhones, Television, YouTube and Tik-Tok videos and video games. This trend is exacerbated by the wide and easy access to (mis)information through social media sites and the global internet. In South Africa specifically, the youth - as I have mentioned previously in this dissertation - are learning Indian Dance forms for reasons that do not seem to be connected to spirituality. The *Shishya* views the teacher as simply a fellow human being with whom they can casually interact. Godliness and the unquestioning respect for the teacher appear to no longer exist and thus, dedication to the Dance (as a form of worship), is now debilitated.

Many Dance teachers in South Africa studied Bharathanatyam decades ago - some as many as four decades ago and have not taken any refresher courses for their professional development. Refresher courses can be a reminder to all Bharathanatyam teachers of their roles as *Gurus* and as teachers and will enhance their ethical practice. This will eventually improve their performance as educators and thus facilitate quality Dance education for children as has been attested to by the interview participants.

Most Bharathanatyam Dance teachers I spoke with learnt to Dance – and then took up teaching as is common in other forms of Dance. They did not train as professional teachers which may have provided them with an academic component of teaching Dance which would include updated theories of education and praxis. Such training might have clarified for them the notion of best teaching practice. It is important for the maintenance of a high standard in the teaching of Bharathanatyam that teachers undergo some training in the latest theories of Dance pedagogy.

It is recommended that an institute for Bharathanatyam be formed and among its tasks would be the regulating of tuition and *Arangetram* fees to ensure that pedagogical aspects are not comprised by the quest to collect fees. Much can be learnt from a reappraisal of a curriculum for Bharathanatyam that was developed by teachers in the UK and American colleges and universities which has been extensively critiqued by Stacey Prickett (2009) and Ann David and Nilima Devi (2009).

## **A case for institutionalisation of Bharathanatyam**

Many programmes of study are governed by an institution that lays down rules for studying and learning and in addition generate a syllabus that incorporates the objectives and standards that should to be achieved and maintained. This is to ensure that a consistency of style and standard can be applied to all who teach such a programme. There is often a governing body that establishes incremental steps to learning; and assessment via tests and examinations of the content that was taught. In this way teaching and learning can be evaluated. Ballet, and other Dance forms as well as most codes of sport, have such controlling bodies and teaching programmes. Syllabi are continually changed and appraised in relation to changing circumstances. This is not the case for the teaching of Bharathanatyam in South Africa today.

Attempts are underway to address this issue, for example, in 2016, the South African Indian Dance Alliance (SAIDA) was launched and states its mission as: “an organisation of Dance practitioners and Dance schools collaborating to elevate the quality and status of Indian classical and folk Dance in South Africa” (SAIDA.org).

Unfortunately, to date SAIDA has yet to generate a syllabus for Bharathanatyam, let alone a Code of Conduct for Dance schools in South Africa. Is this the case because almost all members of the advisory panel of SAIDA run their own Dance schools and hence find it difficult to come up with rules and regulations to keep the various Dance forms in place? Individual members of the panel dare not propose stringent measures for fear of offending their colleagues. This, collegial relationship does not bode well for the strict governance of Bharathanatyam in South Africa. Only an independent controlling body comprising leading experts and practitioners that can act without fear or favour and with full transparency, can lay down the rules that have been agreed and also hold all its members to account. While this may be perceived as an overly harsh measure, in my view it would be in the interest of preserving the legacy of a classical Dance form. Furthermore, such an organisation could also consider licensing Bharathanatyam teachers to ensure that they meet determined criteria of professional teachers. Sanctions can then be imposed on errant teachers and serial offenders could stand the risk of having their licenses revoked.

Meduri notes: “Bharathanatyam manifests itself as a world form today, quite like Ballet, albeit with a different genealogy. It is researched in western academic institutions in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, as well as in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia” (2004:11). This study has noted that Bharathanatyam is not part of the research and practice in the same way as other Dance forms in the academic programmes of Dance departments at tertiary institutions (colleges and universities) in South Africa. There are the beginnings of such work with some modules of Bharathanatyam which had been introduced by Savitri Naidoo in 2010 being continued intermittently by her disciples Darshana Rama and Sarveshan Gangen in 2021. Universities like UKZN and Wits School of the Arts have also had some guest lectures and workshops for their students from time to time. This also appears to be the case in most spaces in the USA with some notable exceptions such as Harvard University, Berkeley University, Penn State, Columbia University and in the UK such as at Roehampton University.

Institutionalising Bharathanatyam will ensure a proper syllabus is followed. This will be accompanied by a certification programme which will ensure structured, coherent, fair assessment of performers of Bharathanatyam at various levels of training and performance. The parameters for assessment can include Balance and Grace, Expression and Emoting, Posture, Rhythm, and Technique, as is being done to a minimal extent in South Africa. A syllabus must prescribe a carefully- constructed path of progression whereby the Dancer grows through focus and perfection on technique, adding layers of emotion, complexity and nuance from the beginner to advanced level, culminating in certification. The advantages of certification include recognition of dancing skills, qualitative assessment of level of accomplishment, encouragement of commitment towards dancing, and the presentation of credentials for arts or academic profiles.

Presently, without an appropriate syllabus, students are taught basic steps and a few Dance items - enough to perform on stage for an *Arangetram*. The theory aspect of Dance is neglected as is the spiritual aspect of expression to communicate the joys and sorrows of life. Students are not taught sufficiently to use the human body and mind to express ideas, emotions or emotional experiences of the inner self. Students are not being taught the meaning of hand gestures which are critical to story-telling nor do they learn the stories upon which so many Bharathanatyam items are based. They do not have even basic lessons in

singing as was confirmed by interview participants. Learning Bharathanatyam in South Africa is conceptualised more as training than an education. A student is taught to effectively embody an aesthetic through physical training, with little reflection on what it means to do so in terms of a cultural heritage and spiritual journey.

Seasoned Dance practitioners I had interviewed in Chennai volunteered their services without fee to compose a syllabus for South African students of Bharathanatyam. The institutionalisation of Bharathanatyam would, in addition, assist in the regulation of fees for tuition and *Arangetram*.

### **Commercialisation of Bharathanatyam**

By far the main issue that seems to have diminished the standard of Bharathanatyam would appear to be a shift towards its commercialisation. Bharathanatyam that was once a path to spirituality has, in my view, become just another Dance form or a commodity to be bought and sold. In the midst of the global pandemic that is COVID 19, there has been a sudden plethora of teaching Bharathanatyam through digital media, for example, video calls, WhatsApp messages and YouTube. These virtual sessions, sometimes undertaken between a *Guru* and a student, frequently take place when each person may be living miles apart or even on two different continents and time zones. Thus, we can see how Bharathanatyam has been taken to a far wider audience in 2019. But we can also observe how Bharathanatyam has been expanding across the globe since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century creating what can be described as an international/diasporic Bharathanatyam community. While there are many Dance teachers who regard Bharathanatyam with deep religiosity and will not dare exploit or change the sacred art form, some India-based *Gurus* are paid in American dollars by rich parents who can afford to pay such exorbitant fees. This remote learning is problematic, and many questions arise.

Is it possible to guide and facilitate a deep yearning for God when the medium of instruction is via digital platforms? What is lost and what may be gained? Does teaching and learning only happen when there is face-to-face encounter? Is the quality of teaching impaired when instruction is given via digital platforms or in worksheets and books compared to face-to-face teaching? The debate still rages on.

For example, in a recent post on Anita Ratnam's Dance portal *Narthaki.com*, Ratnam speaks of how the *Arangetram* season in the United States has come to an end for the year. She writes:

Musicians are back in India with a cool 25 to 40 thousand dollars in their pockets. Parents are scratching their thinning hair in exasperation. Annual vacations stand cancelled until the loans are paid. Now, do the Dance Gurus, who conduct these summer extravaganzas, also encourage their 'shishyas' to watch other Dance shows? Will these young (mostly) women translate into tomorrow's audience? Why has the *Arangetram* become such a showy sham? (Narthaki, 2018).

Teachers in the diaspora of South Africa, have also latched onto the idea that an *Arangetram* can be used as a money spinner as evidenced by Satyabhama, Singh and Maharaj in their interviews. Children undergoing the *Arangetram* do not see how the event is being financially exploited by *Gurus*- they are too carried away by the "showy" nature of the glitz and glamour of colourful costumes and flashy jewellery. I am aware of many South African parents of young students who are paying large sums of money to teachers when many of them have not yet learnt even the full repertoire of a *margam*. *Gurudakshina* - the payment of a sum of money to the teacher - has taken on a monetary vanguard both in India and South Africa. A typical *Arangetram* can now cost at least R50 000 when one considers saris, jewellery, flowers, hire of hall, temple, catering and gifts. The *Arangetram* has become such an extremely expensive event that some students even drop out from learning the Dance form itself.

A leading young exponent of Bharathanatyam, Divya Devagupta, lamented:

With the pressure of having to complete an *Arangetram* (solo performance debut) within 4-7 years of learning, without a consummate understanding of the art and its many facets, mediocrity is on the rise. Although on one side it is heartening to see so many young practitioners of the art, the flip side is that the quality suffers. When young children start turning into performers, with no initiation into the philosophic core of the art or the intricacies of Classical music, people are starting to look for so called "novel", "contemporary" and "relevant" themes blaming the very backbone of the art as archaic. Thus, not only corrupting an art that is so profound but also making it harder for serious professionals of the art to make their own in this rat-race (Divyadevagupta, n.d)

While the *Arangetram* has become an opportunity to fleece parents even in India, the situation is not too rife because of the relatively smaller number of teachers who demand high fees. However even so, a colloquium of leading Bharathanatyam Dance practitioners across the globe came together at the *Natya Kala* conference 2019 which I attended. This conference

interrogated the topic "*Arangetram: Boon or Bane*". Samson strongly emphasised that what is occurring with regards to *Arangetrams* "is criminal in our time". (Samson, 2019) She stressed that Arundale questioned the need for an *arangetram*. Therefore, Kalakshetra does not insist on this ceremony. Several speakers who took part in the healthy discussion moderated by veteran Bharathanatyam Dancer Chitra Vishweswaran, bemoaned the high price tag attached to the *arangetram* and said the event only served to indicate that an acceptable standard of Dance has been achieved. Thus, we can see that Bharathanatyam in South Africa now has a high price-tag attached to it and has become a space for the elite and privileged middle classes. This can result in Bharathanatyam as too elitist and having a dwindling number of followers.

There is much scope for further research into what has made Bharathanatyam a highly lucrative industry rather than a spiritual and artistic practice. Questions such as what has made this Dance form a business remain? Why are *Gurus* placing profits before pedagogy? Is it possible in the same way that Arundale cleansed *Sadir* of the stigma around the *Devadasi* system, that a present-day champion can reinstate Bharathanatyam as a noble art, and cleanse it from this new form of financial gain? At this stage it would seem a difficult path lies ahead. Meanwhile Bharathanatyam swings between the different worlds of creativity and reality, materialism and spirituality, and renunciation and possessiveness.

## **CONCLUSION — THILLANA**

When I embarked on this study, I envisaged finding the answers to several burning questions. While I satisfied myself that the standard of learning and teaching Bharathanatyam had indeed dropped when compared with India, I then confronted many more questions. Where and in what form will this Dance be in 20 years? What can be done to reignite pride in Bharathanatyam? What can be done to ensure Bharathanatyam is not exploited for financial gain? How can Bharathanatyam be made appealing to non-Indian students? What leeway will be allowed for experimentation within a contemporary framework and by whom? Will Bharathanatyam be able to retain its traditional character? Many questions remain unanswered. I hope that the scope of this study will encourage others to conduct extensive further research to understand the many layers surrounding the teaching of Bharathanatyam in South Africa.

### **Limitations of this study**

One of the main limitations of this research was the time allocated for a study of this complexity and scale and one that is in its relative infancy in South Africa. This study was limited to two years. Financial resources also posed certain limitations in terms of how possible it was to engage with a large a sample as access and the practicalities of field work in India make such research very costly. This affected the overall scope of my study. An unexpected obstacle at the midpoint of my study was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This created its own challenges such as physical access to research material; conducting face to face interviews; and hampering free international and local travel in addition to the typical limitations of a bibliography. In my case, access to seminal books in libraries was greatly compromised. Some research of teaching practices in other diaspora spaces such as Australia, Canada, Malaysia and Mauritius would have helped to provide comparison with how Bharathanatyam is faring in these parts of the world compared with Indian settlements in South Africa.

Another limitation for me was having to negotiate how to present findings without implying a negative critical or personal opinion. This is because of the sensitivity of some sections of the Indian Dance community in South Africa that may take umbrage at any form of criticism being

levelled at them, whether this may be justified or not. Hence, I have been very cautious not to offend persons and to stick closely to the evidence and present the bare facts.

### **Perhaps, the time has come to rekindle pride in Bharathanatyam?**

Political dynamics in South Africa have also contributed to a loss of pride in Bharathanatyam, such as an absence of support for the form by way of performance opportunities and teaching venues. There is also the very limited presence of full-length Bharathanatyam works on television and film. There are some exceptions with programmes such as Sunday *Sadhana* (SABC 3) which showcases what some teachers are doing but these are usually short excerpts of teaching and performance processes.

Bharathanatyam is located in a post-Apartheid and post-colonial space in both South Africa and in India. What does this mean for Bharathanatyam classes in Durban and Chennai? How can we use Bharathanatyam to build bridges in a country that is extremely divided in terms of wealth, and class? It seems to me that it needs to adapt in a way that appeals to the present context yet remains mindful of the earlier intent of Bharathanatyam. Unless the social and cultural aspects of the Indian community are seen to be important by the wider South African society, the Indian community will feel increasingly alienated from the rest of society. The teaching of Indian languages in schools has long been accorded pariah status. Indians are frequently reminded by ruling party politicians that they should stop regarding India as their Motherland.

The final comment on teacher-training by Vasugi Singh appears to encapsulate my central argument, that there remains no guiding framework to study Bharathanatyam in South Africa. I am of the view that by incorporating Bharathanatyam into university academic programmes, Indian culture and its arts will be accorded greater significance. In the same way that yoga has been divested of its Indian image and is being adopted by a greater number of people, especially the younger generations around the world for its health and emotional benefits, Bharathanatyam must be repackaged in South Africa as a spiritual experience of sublime aesthetics. The above and more questions would provide fertile ground for other intrepid students to interrogate and resolve.

For now, I am satisfied that I have achieved what I set out to do. Spending hundreds of hours locating and then poring through books, journals and academic papers on Bharathanatyam many in India and some in South Africa, were fruitful in the end. I experienced the interviews as fountains of knowledge and observing the Dance classes in India and South Africa, as deeply insightful. The whole process has culminated in a multi-layered dissertation. I must admit that while I set out on a mission to find the truth, the truth pains me. I am saddened that a Dance form that speaks to my emotional, cultural and spiritual heartbeat is deteriorating in standard in South Africa. I experience this hurt as a personal loss. And even more agonising is that I cannot single-handedly rectify the situation overnight. I cannot even begin to dream of being a reformer in the ilk of the respected Rukmini Devi Arundale. The sands of time are running out. South Africa is fast dropping the traditional Dance form of Bharathanatyam. At least, all is not lost. Only recognising failures and weaknesses and plugging the gaps in the transfer of knowledge pedagogically , can restore Bharathanatyam onto a pedestal which it truly deserves.

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## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Order.	Name	Date	Place & Type of interview	Duration
1	Professor Sudharani Raghupathy	4 March 2020	At her home in Mylapore, Chennai [face-to face]	46 min 02 sec
2	Shrimati Satyabhama	5 March 2020	At her home in Alwarpet, Chennai [face to face]	58 min 35 sec
3	Jayespri Moopen	3 May 2020	At her home in Johannesburg [Zoom session]	40 min 43 sec
4	Smeetha Maharaj	7 May 2020	At her home in Westville, Durban [Zoom session]	42 min 47 sec
5	Vasugi Singh	18 September 2020	At her home in Durban North [Zoom session]	50 min 50 sec
6	Dr Sreelatha Vinod	2 November 2020	At her home in Chennai [Zoom session]	44 min 23 sec

## APPENDIX 2: 3X EXTRACTS FROM INTERVIEWS

### Extract 1: Smeetha Maharaj

SD: And like most other things in life, the classical arts, competitive sport and even religion come under the spell of money-making. Do you think Bharathanatyam has fallen victim to commercialism?

SM: Yeah, because...I think the older teachers were the genuine ones when they started teaching...they had something and started teaching....there are very few...you could see dedication and spent extra hours with the students. I also did it those days but which now I can't do because the students have increased. Occasionally, I work with some students. Like if you look at Shiksha's school...it is not the true reflection. She is getting so many hundreds of children....which is a good thing for the area where she is operating...for social reasons because their children are in a better place. But in terms of quality, you not seeing it. For instance, if I graduated somebody – I don't even like the teen graduate – straight away to go and teach...they themselves are new at the form...they need to perform more, they need to mature...before they can teach. I have seen one student who came to me from Shiksha...she was barely 20, in university....the mother called to say don't you think she can do that, that and that....because she has already been a teacher. She had her arangetram at 14 with Shiksha. How can that student teach at that age? I was shocked. I would never have said she had even finished her arangetram. Now Shiksha is a lovely person, we close...we related also. It's not a personal thing...we talking about what is happening now...she is one of some (teachers). How can you make young girls become teachers? Now that is really wrong. Different if some older students help with something basic during the class when the teacher is busy. That is just for that instance. But not to teach full-time. So many have arangetrams and think they can be teachers now. It is happening with so many of them. There is no depth in what they are doing.

SD: Do we need to retrain the trainers? Is it a case of there being too many poorly trained teachers only interested in making money?

SM: I will say so. Not everyone is a teacher - you may be a Dancer. Not everybody is cut out to teach. How you get across to students and how you get it out if them, is something else. If you just learnt to Dance, it does not mean you can teach. We should have a teachers' forum. Satyabhama was doing this...when she was here, then we had quality.

SD: So, I have interviewed Satyabhama...and there were lots of things we may need to look at doing with her. We need to look at the art rather than the egos. I may be young and shooting my mouth.

SM: It is horrible to listen to the facts. But to make corrections you have to be open.

SD: It is enough to keep having a WhatsApp group where everybody says let's do this, and let's do that, but nothing gets done. Everybody is acting like everything is okay. You even saw that I left without even saying I am going. It gets to a point where nothing is being done, and I might as well just do it for myself. And you need to think what is the main purpose here. It is the art.

And if you want to nurture you have to out that first. The biggest problem in SA is people's egos.

## **Extract 2: Shrimati Satyabhama**

SD: How can our teachers rectify....?

SK First of all, this is again not at all...I am not pointing a finger...I am not naming anybody....all of us including me... if I was there...we need to approach this as art for art's sake. Art for art's sake....not....you know what....whether it gives me a name...whether my name gets mentioned in the newspaper or the next Indian programme on the television mentions your name...it should not bother you...it must be art for art's sake. If we can do stuff like that, the change will not be evident immediately, but the change will be evident over a few years...just step back and say, this time what I am talking, when I go to this meeting and I am talking or when I write this article for this magazine or when I do something, I want to do it because I don't want instant fame.....you know Rukmini Devi had a beautiful saying sweetie...she'll say "you plant trees from which you will never benefit from the shade...but you will still plant it because you want someone else to benefit from the shade." That should be the approach. If I say I would like to come and sit for 10 days and work out a syllabus....but then again it's no good working out a syllabus Kanna. Every teacher must abide by it. And if the teacher does not know all the Adavus, then she should come for a little teacher's workshop and learn.

SD: Refresher course.

SK Will they do...will they do? The only thing I can tell you...for the little life that I have got left....we have to be very honest about this....physically I don't know how long I will be able to....but whatever energy I have still left...a few years I still have....you know I love South Africa...I feel like I am at home. Because Kanna....I worked there for so long and I know that is our people...I truly care about them Kanna....I truly, truly care about them....if there is anything I can do...anything for them....I don't want any mention in any newspaper, I don't want any mention in the TV...I don't want any of this....right...absolutely nothing....I'll happily do it. If they want a refresher course for teachers....that's what last time I said to someone...I said I have no vested interest here....and I've stepped back....so I am not going to take anyone's student....I am not going to do this....because many of them are worried about all this thing. I said I'm conducting no classes. I don't have a school. I not interested in taking this...

SD: There should be more of this...

SK That's what I'm saying...I told that person I am prepared to come once a year also and spend time....you people want to have the exams at that time....I'm happy to come and be a complete outside examiner....so, no teacher can influence me...I don't even have to know whose student she is...when I exam that's how it should be....I should be in a room and that student must walk in and just tell me what her syllabus is. And not even tell me whose student she is. That is how examination should be conducted. So, I am not supporting this that and nobody thinks anyone is supporting anybody. And when the teachers come for a refresher course, again I'm not taking your student, your student, nothing. I'm just there to make sure you know the syllabus.

That's what I call non-interfering giving. This is what this is. But you are a young person. I hope you will achieve something like this. But I will tell you something right now in front while I am sitting here....it will be very hard. Because you have people who are so entrenched in what...the way they have done things and the way they have been doing things...how much ever you will say....and until and unless you are able to sit down and change their minds...

Like if you called me and said, Akka, for 10 days come and do only an adavu workshop, I'll happily come and do it for you. I don't care. Anybody's student you bring for me. But of

### **Extract 3: Jayespri Moopen**

JM: I don't think comments are a bad thing. That is necessary. If there is constructive comment, it means we are talking to each other. I know Heather gets into trouble for all the things she says. But I think that when you say something, you must have the information to back it up. Like Anita Ratnam got all of us to share our views on Facebook. This is the right time to do that when we have so much of time. Social media is the best platform at the moment.

SD: Like most other things in life, the classical arts, competitive sport and even religion, sooner or later come under the spell of money-making. Do you think Bharathanatyam has fallen victim to commercialisation?

JM: In South Africa, yes, definitely. There is no doubt about it, If you look at the list of the cost of having a graduation...we had our graduation in India and it cost us nothing....here it is like a family affair, like it is in UK and USA...like all expats...people in diaspora....they think it must be a big event, like a wedding. They miss the point of why it is done. If you go to India, some of those arangetrams are also just as lavish. But that is just the end product of it. But also, when you teaching...when I was in Kalakshetra, we only had six in a class. We were all different shapes, sizes, heights and we needed individual attention. We just had small numbers. And when I started teaching, I had small numbers and you do not make money from that. It's only when you grow that you make money out of it. People today have 70 to 100 in a school and have classes one day in a week. I definitely think there is a lot of commercialisation attached to it. Even people who are doing it professionally have to earn a living from it. If people have full-time jobs and are teaching on a Saturday, they should not be charging an arm and a leg. Because it should be out of the love of the art...because they have other ways and means of earning. But you will find many who have full-time jobs and are teaching on a Saturday and are charging a lot of money for lessons. Then there are a lot of people who are professional people and are expected to do things for free. As if it should be a cultural thing. But you had to go to India and go and learn it....and you or your parents had to pay for it. So why should you not charge. Yes, there are two ways of looking at it. Some people are making money from it...some of us are professional and apply for funding to help subsidise the art because it is a luxury...not a necessity. But the commercialisation dilutes the reason why you are teaching.

SD: Do you think we need to retrain the teachers because there are too many poorly trained teachers who are out there only to make money?

JM: I think so...there is a perception out there that as soon as I graduate, I will open a school. But I have a full-time job where I am earning a salary but I will have classes on a Saturday just to earn more money. A lot of them are doing it in Jo'burg.

SD: And don't you think those who trained many years ago should go for refresher courses?

JM: I have reconnected over the years with friends just to keep in touch. Refresher training is important ...it is good for you as a teacher so you can inspire the generations to come.