

## Bharatanatyam in New Zealand:

### A story of dance, diaspora and cultural change

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#### **Abstract**

Experiences of migration or diaspora has led to new predicaments for maintaining dance traditions (Ahmed, 2013; Brooks & Meglin, 2011). Current research is exploring how migrants learn to inhabit these new geo-political spaces. This paper will serve as a springboard for investigating how classical Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam plays a role in enhancing Indian identity in New Zealand. The study employs a combination of dance ethnography and autoethnography as methodologies for examining how this dance is being practiced in the South Pacific city of Dunedin.

The journeys of migration involve a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience. What migration narratives involve, then, is spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self: a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied.

(Ahmed, 2013, pp. 341-342)

Experiences of migration or diaspora has led to new predicaments for maintaining dance traditions (Ahmed, 2013; Brooks & Meglin, 2011). Current research is exploring how migrants learn to inhabit these new geo-political spaces. This paper will serve as a springboard for investigating how Indian dance forms, such as Bharatanatyam, plays a role in enhancing Indian identity in New Zealand. The study employs a combination of dance ethnography and autoethnography as methodologies for examining how this dance is being practiced in the South Pacific.

I am the primary investigator in this research and the ethnography draws from my memoirs as a dancer from India. I found an Indian dance school called Natyaloka School of Indian Dance that provides vital cultural education in the Otago region of New Zealand on October 6, 2011. The school is the research context for this paper, which is a work in progress. I begin by painting a portrait of

Bharatanatyam by turning to my reflections of learning the dance form and later relocating to New Zealand.

As part of our family tradition, where all of us girls were enrolled in dance and music schools at the age of four, I joined my first Bharatanatyam class under the guidance of Smt. Kalamandalam Vinodini at the Nrithyalaya School of Classical Dance and Music in Kozhikode, Kerala. It was a Vijayadashami day, an auspicious day according to the Hindu calendar to start learning skills to acquire new knowledge. I was also enrolled for Carnatic Music (South Indian Classical Music) under the guidance of Sri K V Babu.

After rigorous training and saadhakam (practise), I had my debut performance—Arangetram—at the age of nine. This was a stepping-stone to my dance career, and I continued my training in Bharatanatyam at the dance school under Smt. Kalamandalam Saraswathy, and also started training in Mohiniattam and Kuchipudi under my guru's guidance. Since then I have been learning and performing these dance forms across several stages in India as part of my guru's dance troupe. I also represented my school in various competitions and won prizes. Meanwhile, I also had my debut performance in music called Kacheri soon after my Arangetram. But then a few years later, during my teenage years to be precise, I stopped learning Carnatic music due to several reasons. One of the main reasons being my refusal to wake up at 5.30 am during weekends for my music classes.

After my graduation I also started training in Kathak (a dance form from North India) under Smt Nirupama and Sri T. D Rajendra and was part of their dance company Abhinava. We performed across several stages in India, and here I was polished on how a professional artist works right from conceptualisation to the performance and responsibilities thereafter.

In 2010 I became a part of the global Indian/Malaylai diaspora community. Moving to Dunedin with my husband was exciting and has been a major turning point in my life. At the stopover in Auckland, I saw people from my community all around me. Right from the florists, airport security, ground staff, cab drivers, to the duty manager at the hotel I stayed in for the night. But Dunedin was a whole new world altogether; a small beautiful picturesque town that has an old world charm to it. Unlike Auckland, there were fewer people from my own community. It was cold, windy and the air was crisp. I came here at the peak of winter and I found it really hard to sleep in a cold

room. The heater was on and I had an electric blanket but that didn't help me. The deafening silence around me made it even harder. I realised I was living in an alien world away from my family, away from home. Nevertheless, I was excited as I planned how I could start my new life there.

I started working on my hidden agenda, to launch myself as a Bharatanatyam artist. I took part in the Dunedin Diwali Festival in 2011 and, seeing me dance, the parents who were of Indian origin started enquiring if they could send their daughters to me to learn Bharatanatyam. I was nervous at first as I realised it is a huge responsibility to mould young girls as beautiful dancers.

After much consultation and thinking plus encouragement from my fellow artists, friends, family and blessings from my Gurus, I founded my dance school Natyaloka meaning 'World of Dance' on October 2011 in the spare room at my apartment with just three students. A year later I moved into my own studio and the number of students learning Bharatanatyam increased. Natyaloka is the only Indian dance school in the Otago region and thus, my passion slowly became my profession.

The students who come to my dance school are of Indian origin from Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Bangladesh, those who migrated directly from India and those who are not of Indian origin. The age range is between five years and 45 years and include a mix of school and university students, working adults and working mothers. I also take Skype classes with three students who moved to Ashburton, Oamaru and Christchurch. I am being promised more students from the community in Dunedin right from when their daughters are born.

There I am, a migrant from India negotiating my identity in the diaspora by establishing myself as the Indian performing artist that practices Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam, Kuchipudi and Kathak. But I decided to take one step at a time. And Bharatanatyam was my first step. I started a new life from scratch with a sense of loneliness of being away from all the familiar sights, smells and affection of home. I tried to fit into the host society and nurture the nostalgia of being at home at the same time. This I did by fusing Indian clothes with western, watching Indian programmes and movies online, speaking my native language Malayalam within the house and English outside, cooking Indian cuisine at home and trying out different culinary treats that Dunedin has to offer, celebrating festivals with my community members,

listening to Indian music and practising and introducing my dance form to the community of Dunedin. In retrospect, I see how I was trying to recreate my home in a host society. By establishing myself as an artist and running a dance school, I became the quintessential Indian cultural link for the Indian diaspora and the people of Dunedin at the same time.

### **Bharatanatyam: A story of revival and survival**

Bharatanatyam is one of the nine dance forms that have been given the classical status by the Indian government. The techniques are highly complex and are divided into three main sections—*nritta* (pure dance techniques), *natya* (expression) and *nritya* (a combination of pure dance techniques and expressions using hand gestures, body language and face). The dance form demands precision, strong footwork, knowledge of rhythm patterns, music and the vocabulary. The footwork is done in three levels, *aramandalam*—a half sitting posture where the knee is bent outwards, with an erect torso and the foot is grounded firmly on the floor, *muzhumandalam*—a full sitting posture on your toes with knee bent outwards and an erect torso and *samam*—where you stand straight with a straight knee and feet together. The *abhinaya*, or the expressive part of the dance, involves use of hand gestures, leisurely gaits, being lyrical, graceful and expressive to enact a story or to communicate with the audience. The dancer wears ankle bells to accentuate the footwork. The costume and make up used for this dance form is influenced by the cultural environment of South India. The relationship to Carnatic music from the South of India is integral. At a staged performance at present, the musicians who accompany the dancer sit on the right-hand side of the stage. A dancer is accompanied by the *nattuvanar*, who chants the rhythmic syllables along with his *nattuvangam* (cymbals), emphasising the rhythm of the dance. Other musicians are *mridangam* (drums), bamboo flute, violin and sometimes a *vina*. The vocalist introduces each composition with a specific *raga* (musical scale) and *tala* (time cycle of rhythm) and the dancer improvises on stage. This is just an overview of the dance form.

Bharatanatyam's genesis story begins in India; however, the dance is practiced and performed all over the world, including New Zealand. The dance metamorphosed into a global phenomenon after its complex revival process. The main character in the story is the *devadasi* who were dedicated to the Hindu temples in South India by marrying the deity (*Pottukuthal*) through a ritual, similar to a marriage ceremony for other women (Kersenboom-Story, 1987; Devesh Soneji,

2010b; Viswanathan, 2008). Along with other responsibilities as a nityasumangali (ever-auspicious woman as they are linked to an immortal spouse) of the temple, they also danced in the temple precincts and the sanctum sanctorum as a way to ward off the evil eye from the deity and the ruling King (Kersenboom-Story, 1987; Soneji, 2012).

All arts and sciences prospered under the wings of the temple, generously supported by the reigning king. The king's holy strength, i.e. to be victorious, maintain peace within his own territory, enhance rain and rich crops was sustained by the temple priests through ritual and by devadasis who served in many cases both the temple and the court by their ever-auspicious presence and arts (Kersenboom-Story, 1987). The dance form that they practice was called sadir or dasiattam, and they learned this dance form along with music from a young age and perform their debut performance during their marriage ceremony (Kersenboom-Story, 1987; Soneji, 2010a). Some of the rituals related to their debut performance like the silangaipooja (worshipping the ankle bells) is still practiced during an arangetram that is practiced in South India (O'Shea, 1998; Viswanathan, 2008).

Though married to the deity, devadasis had non-conjugal relationships with upper-caste men and were literate, which was unheard of then among the South Indian women. They also served as courtesan dancers who danced at the reigning King's courts and were treated as commodities that were regularly bought and sold with the permission of the royal courts (Soneji, 2010b; Soneji, 2012). They received a salary from the temple along with other benefits like land holdings, pension and grants in return of their service to god in the form of rituals and dance performances which were mainly done to ward off the evil eyes which has been cast on the deity (Meduri, 1996; Soneji, 2012). Though they had all the privileges it depended on them remaining in service and continuing the tradition by initiating their daughter into the devadasi system. This dance form flourished during the Chola, Nayak and the Maratha kingdoms (O'Shea, 2007; Soneji, 2010c).

At the beginning of the mid-nineteenth century, South India witnessed social reform movements that wanted to displace the devadasi community from the social realm and performance practices. With the British government starting its 'anti-nautch' movement upholding the Victorian moral values, the dancers and the dance form was looked down upon. Nautch is an anglicised name of the term 'nach', which in Hindi means dance. These agitations complicated the status of devadasis in the society (Chakravorty, 2008). English had become the official

language of higher education in India and with that, ideas of the West were accessed. Indigenous customs and institutions were being re-perceived in the light of the new Victorian approach (Coorlawala, 2004).

Revivalists focused on reconfiguring *sadir*, the dance form, with links to pre-colonial times and promoted the dance form as one of the nation's cultural treasures. With the reconstruction of dance forms in India during the fight for independence from colonial rule, new forms were constructed under the label 'tradition' (Srinivasan, 2003). Firstly, they connected the history of the dance form to a written document, especially Sanskrit texts. This cut off the dance form from its social roots. It also enabled a 'pan-Indian' reading of aesthetic history, which the *Natyashastra* read as the 'common root' for all regional performing traditions (Soneji, 2010b). During this process of revival, *sadir*, the dance form practiced by the *devadasis*, was renamed as Bharatanatyam and the *devadasi* lifestyle was criminalised and they were banned from dancing in public with the implementation of Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act in 1947 (Meduri, 1996, 2008; Soneji, 2012). Thus, Bharatanatyam rose to being a dance form upholding Indian cultural ethos and traditions. With the efforts from Bharatanatyam artists and educators, Balasaraswathi and Rukmini Devi Arundale, Bharatanatyam catapulted to becoming one of the most popular Indian dance forms, especially among the Indian diaspora. The story of these two artists needs to be told, but for now I will focus on Bharatanatyam in the diaspora and write the story another time.

## **Evolving 'Indian' identities**

Diaspora as a term has been in use from the 1980s mainly to define the Jewish diaspora later extending it to Armenian, Greek, African and Palestinian diasporic communities (Brubaker, 2005; Safran, Kumar Sahoo, & Lal, 2008). Vertovec (1997, 2000) describes 'diaspora' as practically any population which is considered 'deterritorialised' or 'transnational'—that is, a population which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe.

Today, diaspora and diaspora community is a term used to define any community living outside their homeland—migrants, refugees, alien residents and expatriates (Safran, 1991). Bruneau (2010) states that the term diaspora, long used only to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world, has entered everyday language. Tölölyan (Khagram & Levitt, 2008, 1991) explains that until the 1930s the social formations known as 'diasporas' consisted of a network of

communities, sometimes sedentary and at others quite mobile, that often lived in voluntary dispersion from their homelands and that resisted full assimilation or were denied the option of assimilating, or both at the same time.

Indians have a long history of migration to different parts of the world over time—pre-colonial migration, colonial migration that began in the 1830s to the British, French and Dutch colonies and post-colonial migration to industrially developed countries (Safran et al., 2008; Sahoo, 2006). With a population of more than 20 million spread over the globe, this reimagining of territoriality is done through an evocative call to feel the love and affection of mother India (Raghuram, 2008). The Indian diasporic community holds its own unique place in history and maintains a complex mixture of community identities (Booth, 2014) as noted in a study of Indian migrants in New York City:

Indians have not only immigrated exclusively to the USA, but also for many decades, they have settled in other countries around the world notably Guyana, Trinidad, Uganda, Dubai and England whenever the opportunity presented itself. Although all these diaspora communities originated in India, it is important to note that they vary culturally. (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 68)

The transnational nature of the Indian diaspora and its migration history in New Zealand has created many community groups that identify with transnational, transcultural as well as local and culturally specific preferences (Booth, 2014; Leckie, 2007, 2009). Indians are usually put in the Asian category in New Zealand, and statistical projections suggest that Asian New Zealanders, i.e. people born in New Zealand who identify with an Asian ethnicity, will be a growing population in New Zealand over the next few decades. Data reports people of Indian ethnicity are the fastest growing diasporic community in New Zealand according to the recent census reports.

The first Indian to come to New Zealand was a Bengali man, a lascar who jumped off the ship 'City of Edinburgh', owned by the East Indian Company, at a South Island harbour and married a local Māori woman and lived in Bay of Islands (Leckie, 1998). Later, a Goan man named Edward Peter, who was also known as 'Black Peter', facilitated Otago's gold rush though he was not acknowledged much in the history (Leckie, 1998). Until the nineteenth century, most of these Indian immigrants were ambiguous about their nationality or they settled in New Zealand by marrying a local New Zealander. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, there was a huge wave of migration from Gujarat and Punjab regions in India owing to economic transformations in Colonial India. At the same time, Indians were bought to Fiji as indentured labourers by the British and this migration generated a movement of ‘free’ migrants, some of whom settled in New Zealand (Friesen & Kearns, 2008). After 1921, objections were raised in Parliament about ‘Hindoo’ hawkers and peddlers and they passed the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act 1921 which restricted movements of new migrants into New Zealand (Friesen & Kearns, 2008). With the passing of the 1987 Immigration Act when New Zealand demanded more skilled labourers, the country experienced a new wave of Indian immigrants who were professionals in business, engineering and the medical field.

The Indian migration picked up in the 1990s. In 2001 there were 20 million people of Indian origin scattered around 53 countries. Compared to other countries like United States of America and the United Kingdom (where there are 1.7 million and one million people respectively settled), or even Australia (which boasts of 200,000 Indian origin settlers), New Zealand gives a smaller number but a significant one according to the latest reports from the 2013 census. Immigrants of Indian ethnicity have been recognised as the fastest growing ethnicity next to Chinese immigrants and the numbers are expected to grow in the coming years.

What comprises an ‘Indian’ is a matter of debate in most countries, including New Zealand. While in India, a community is defined a Malayali or a Tamilian or a Maharashtrian according to the language spoken by them, the state where they belong and practising of cultural traditions specific to the region they belong to. In New Zealand they are seen as one community with no regional cultural differences. According to Jayaram (2009), “Indian communities abroad have been invariably required to negotiate the problem of ethnicity.”

Indian migrants from the 1920s have had to face a lot of racial discrimination while in New Zealand, and this led to the formation of ethnic associations that became the voice of the community and asserted their rights to live in this land. The Indians living in Auckland formed the Auckland Indian Association in 1920, followed by the Wellington Indian Association in 1925 and in Taumarunui in 1926. They realised the need to coordinate the activities throughout the region and for this purpose they formed the New Zealand central Indian Association that formed an umbrella organisation with the rest of the local associations from Pukekohe, Bay of Plenty, Taranaki, Christchurch, Manuwatu and Waikato performing under its wings (Bandyopadhyay, 2006; Leckie, 2007). These Indian associations began to

perform a dual role of protesting against discrimination and infringement of rights by outsiders and promoting community solidarity and national identity among the insiders. While the issue of promoting community solidarity and national identity among the members of the Indian association was initially easier, as most of them were Gujaratis and Punjabis (McLeod, 1986), the later wave of Indians from different parts of India with different languages, states and religions led to the formation of sub associations like the Wellington Bengali Association, Wellington Malayalee Association, Dunedin Malayalee Association, and Wellington Tamil Society. These associations celebrated their regional festivals with cultural programmes and cuisine and attendance ranges from 100-350 people or more. Some of these community organisations also have their own regional language training programmes for the younger generation of Indian Kiwis (Bandyopadhyay, 2006).

The make-up of the Indo-Fijian migrants was mainly influenced by the composition of indentured labourers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These indentured migrants were from Uttar Pradesh in North India and later from South India. After the period of indenture, some of the Indians returned to India while others stayed on and cultivated on leased agricultural lands. Once the wave of ‘free’ migrants from Gujarat moved to Fiji as tradesmen, shopkeepers and money lenders, the Indo-Fijians developed a lingua franca based on Hindi, and the community accepted a homogenous identity with Hinduism and cuisine (Friesen & Kearns, 2008).

Since the 1970s the New Zealand government started recognising biculturalism based on the principle of power sharing between the two primary groups, the Māori and the Pākehā. After the rise of Asian immigrants in New Zealand and white middle class backlash against the biculturalism in the 1990s, it was realised in New Zealand that a policy of multiculturalism was the only way to accommodate all ethnicities into a broader New Zealand national identity. Multiculturalism refers to “the simultaneous existence of several cultures side by side” (Norridge, 2010). This discourse offers Indians a place within the nation at the same time branding the community as Indians that tends to erase the ideas of cultural differences within the community and the Indians are expected to be a part of the generalised ‘Indian identity’ (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). With the combination of these elements of being an Indian, the Indian community of New Zealand today are facing a new challenge as faced by the rest of the Indian diaspora scattered around the world—negotiating with multiple identities. On the

one hand they are expected to identify with the host society and on the other they stick to their ethnic distinctiveness and within that sphere of ethnic distinctiveness they also associate with their regional identity (Friesen & Kearns, 2008).

### ***Affection for mother India in the diaspora***

Creating a home away from home can be an emotional process for migrants; the nostalgia for home is powerful when you are trying to settle in a foreign land. To evoke these feelings, they try to recreate the culture, language, sport, festivals and religious beliefs of their homeland. For many diasporic Indians who simultaneously face detachment from the homeland and longing for the idea of a lost cultural heritage, cultural performances become interpretations of diasporic existence (Chacko & Menon, 2011). Writer Anthony Shay (2006) asserts that dance is also a major vehicle for the construction and reinvention of identity and heritage. Indian traditional dance forms, owing to its link to Indian cultural ethos, myths, tradition and values, have been highly regarded by the diaspora all over the world.

Learning Bharatanatyam or any other traditional Indian dance forms in the diaspora is often seen as an extracurricular activity (Katrak, 2011). The dance's identity is culturally intertwined with India's national identity (Kaepler, 2004; O'Shea, 2003). Labels can be problematic as multiple cultural interpretations of 'Indianness' are represented in the Indian diaspora, creating a multitude of flows of local and global performance identities (Chakravorty & Gupta, 2012; Johnson, 2007). Ethnic cultural festivals that feature dance sponsored and funded by the state, like Diwali celebration, is another way for the Indians to reimagine their ethnic boundaries. Diwali, a Hindu religious festival that was initially celebrated within a closed community in New Zealand, is now a secular celebration of Indian culture. These events are highly commercialised and are 'contact zones' that bring different cultures together displaying a variety of music and dance styles and they "exhibit cultures, music and identities to an audience that celebrates not only the festival, but also negotiates what it means to be a contemporary Indian-New Zealander" (Johnson, 2007).

Bollywood, Bharatanatyam, folk dances and fusion performances feature across New Zealand in the diasporic events. These events draw large crowds and involve large amounts of community participation. These performances are done by local Indian community groups and dance schools and also host Indian artists sent by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations that promote Indian culture abroad.

The celebrations are sites for cross-cultural encounters and offer the non-Indians an insight into Indian culture which is identified by key points like cuisine, Bollywood dance, Bhangra, Indian traditional dance forms, music, crafts, fashion and wedding expo. The main attraction being Bollywood dance.

Bollywood dance as a globally popular dance style has seen a rapid growth (Shresthova, 2003, 2011) owing to media attention, Indian diaspora communities abroad, Bollywood film themes that cater to an NRI audience, export of Bollywood by conducting film awards outside India and filming at foreign locations, dance reality shows that have a Bollywood segment and the Oscar win of the British movie 'Slumdog Millionaire'. YouTube videos with Bollywood dance instructions also made Bollywood dancing popular in the Western world, making it synonymous with Indian culture.

Trying to gauge the interest in Indian dance forms including Bharatanatyam, I was surprised to know that most of the people I spoke to from the Dunedin community didn't know that India had diverse dance traditions and not just Bollywood. This would leave me in a precarious situation, as sometimes my performances were either called Bollywood or Indian dance, which was equally problematic. Later, some of the students who came to my dance class shared their experiences on how they had to explain to others that they were learning Bharatanatyam and not Bollywood. (Author's journal, May 20, 2014)

With a small but significant presence, Bharatanatyam is the most common traditional dance form taught in Auckland and Wellington, and is presented at community events and festivals. Booth (2013a, 2013b; 2014) states in her research on how Bharatanatyam has become the official 'classical' dance of the middle- and upper-class south Indians living here. The dance is taught mostly by women with the exception of two male Bharatanatyam performers in Wellington and Auckland respectively. In an effort to trace the history of Bharatanatyam in New Zealand, I found an article by Purushottama Billimoria (1994) where he mentions Louise Mary Lightfoot, Australia's first woman architect and a ballerina, who was initiated into learning Bharatanatyam after attending a workshop by Rukmini Devi Arundale in Melbourne. According to Billimoria, Anna Pavlova suggested that Lightfoot learn Bharatanatyam from Rukmini Devi Arundale. Apart from Bharatanatyam, Lightfoot was also trained in Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi and Kalari—a martial art form from Kerala. It was while learning Kathakali at Kerala Kalamandalam that she met

Ananda Shivaram. They joined hands together and toured Australia, New Zealand and Fiji for the first time in the 1950s.

The Sydney Morning Herald that came out on October 5, 1950, had a small advertisement under the 'Amusements' section that mentioned Sivaram's performance in Sydney on his way to New Zealand and Canada. But it is not clear what the performance showcased. Contributions by dancers Amala Devi (1970) Usha and Bala Balachandran (1970-1980), Kanan Deobakhta and Vivek Kinra in popularising Bharatanatyam in New Zealand are significant. I am yet to explore each dancer's experiences.

Bharatanatyam as a cultural, historical and religious form of dance is perpetuated through the guru-shishya (teacher-student) method both in India and abroad. Bharatanatyam in the diaspora is used not only to train students in the disciplined use of the body and for cultural knowledge but also by linking the name of this dance style, Bharata (India), and Natyam (dance) with India as a whole evokes a narrow nationalism that glides easily into a troubling religious nationalism (Katrak, 2004).

Through my notes, self-realisation and research, I relate myself to the 21st century migrant dance professionals who moved to New Zealand after marriage. Setting up a dance school here, I am also being considered as the cultural ambassador to India. Though I am not. The first three and half years of my artistic experience here was largely focused on creating an awareness about diverse dance traditions in India including Bharatanatyam through workshops, master classes, performances and dance residencies. While to the non-Indian community it was about letting them know about the dance form at a basic level, within my dance studio I had added responsibilities of educating the students about history, feminism, politics, current socio-cultural significance, mythology, language and Indian philosophies apart from dance. I also create a platform where my students can celebrate their multiple identities and explore the contemporariness of the dance form by tying it to the present realities. (Author's journal, May 20, 2014)

## **Bharatanatyam in Dunedin: Experiences**

Scholars Jacqueline Leckie, Hew McLeod, Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, Friesen and Kearns, Ajay Kumar Sahoo, and Willam Saffran have researched the study of Indian diaspora in New Zealand extensively. Their studies focused on the history of Indian

diaspora in New Zealand, their growth and how they tried to retain their ethnic identity by involving themselves in ethnic associations, celebrating religious and cultural events, maintaining their language and performing arts. There is no literature investigating the role of dance, especially Bharatanatyam, in negotiating the Indian identity among the diasporic dance students here. These stories by my students are a stepping-stone to more scholarly work in this region.

Sarita is a senior student at Natyaloka. For Sarita dance has always been a part of her life. Right from when she was studying in Kothamangalam, a small town in India, she was part of the church programmes and community events. She moved to Dunedin in 2005, when she was six years old. To her, soon after moving to New Zealand, the people around her all looked similar. She says,

It was a bit overwhelming and then there was this language barrier. I didn't know much English. My school lunches became sandwiches, fruits and burgers and when I got back home, I relished having my rice and spicy chicken curry. I was the only Indian in the school but everyone was nice and they were curious to know more about Indian culture. I watched English movies and cartoons to pick up the language. My English teacher helped me a lot. Wearing pants was weird and I stopped wearing kajal and bindis. And of course the cold weather was [a] bit hard to adjust [to].

My mother wanted to be a dancer, but studies were her parents' priority. So, right from when I remember I have been dancing, my mother was my first teacher, a huge supporter, even now. I tried Bollywood but it never connected with me. I started learning Bharatanatyam and I felt that connection. Though I started initially after my mother's encouragement, now I love it! I felt the connection back to my roots, with the ancestors of my land, the mythology, the society then. I experienced spirituality where I connected with my audience, the music, the dance and myself. But sometimes the female characters can be damsel-like. I like the strong feminist ones.

I like the sense of community within our dance school when we all get together for our annual production. Being a Bharatanatyam dancer is not just about dancing, there are so many different elements to it. Dress and make-up, remembering the technique patterns and emotions, and helping others in the group. So many things. But all this has helped me in my normal life. It has helped me immensely at school. Dance is the only cultural thing I do. The

only thing that makes me feel Indian. I am not just a Kiwi. I am not just an Indian. I am moulded by both cultures. Both aspects are within me. You don't have to identify as a race. Race doesn't make you stand out.

Bhavya\*, another student at Natyaloka, moved to Dunedin for her studies from Singapore four years ago. Her family has been settled in Singapore for generations and she identifies herself as Singapore Indian. She has been learning Bharatanatyam in Singapore from when she was seven years old. Moving to Dunedin was a culture shock for her—the cold weather, people and food—but by practising Bharatanatyam, she says she wanted to continue her Indian tradition. “I feel privileged to continue to do what I love. Makes me feel at home. And connect back to my Indian roots.” Bhavya has never lived in India but this dance form enhances her Indian identity that was passed on through her ancestors.

Identity formation among second-generation immigrant youth usually reflects their experiences related to ‘otherness’, the desire to embrace their heritage, and the inherent hybridity of their existence (Kasnitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2009; Levitt & Waters, 2002). According to Hall (1990), identity is not fixed and changes in each reiteration depending on the discourses within which it is located. The theoretical concept of hybridity has emerged simultaneously with the notion of diaspora to explain cultural identity. Hybridity emphasises the exchanges between various cultural identities, though most prominent theorisations of this process posit that all culture is inherently hybrid (Bhabha, 1996; Prashad, 2000). Hybridity is not simply the fusion of two categories of identity; hybridity, instead, destabilises the fixity of these categories (Bhabha, 1996). This ‘hybridness’ that is seen in the above experiences is common among the rest of the Indian origin students in class.

But geographical boundary is no longer a stumbling block for those willing to bridge cultural gaps (Venkataraman, 1994). Another Natyaloka dancer, eight-year-old Janet, was born in USA. Her family moved to Dunedin about 3-4 years ago. A ballet dancer, she came to me three years ago with a desire to learn Bharatanatyam. With her mother she had come for one of Natyaloka's performances, and she said the beautiful dancing fascinated her. Her mom spoke to me and I initially thought that it was all because of the dressing up that the dancers did. I showed her a video of how a class is taken at Natyaloka. I was not sure if she wanted to do this. But she insisted on coming to class. Janet started her classes in 2014, and from then on she has been part of the Natyaloka family. I

asked her why she wanted to learn this dance form and she said, “I like dancing and I like to stomp!”

### **Bridging cultural gaps in Dunedin**

Tradition is ever changing, reproducing and reinventing just like how Bharatanatyam is now (Kaepler, 2004; O’Shea, 2003, 2007). Natyaloka is created with a vision to bring dance towards the wider community of Dunedin and not just restrict it to the Indian community and its events. In Dunedin, where initially not many people knew about Bharatanatyam and where any Indian dance form is called Bollywood, it has been quite a journey of exploration for me trying to establish this dance form here. I placed the groundwork for this by working at the grassroots level with schools and other communities with workshops, performances and associations with Dance Aotearoa NZ and Dance and Physical Theatre projects like *Dancing Like the Stars* and creating an awareness of this dance form. Natyaloka’s productions have been trying to acknowledge the hybrid identities that my students embody through choreographies, themes and music. It is a space where they can be who they are. Apart from learning dance, its complex history and oral traditions, classes at Natyaloka encourages the dialogues on tradition, feminism, mythology, identity, politics, home, belonging and community.

Compared to Europe and USA, Bharatanatyam is fairly new in New Zealand. Here, Bharatanatyam is synonymous with Hindu religion and is being considered as an untouched ‘traditional’ dance form (Booth, 2014; Johnson, 2007). The dance form is looked through the lens of orientalism and gets restricted under the description of colours, costumes and jewellery. The dance, music, the different layers of meaning and the dancing body are mostly unknown. Bharatanatyam and its different layers, its potential and its relevance in the present society and in community dance education are yet to be explored in New Zealand.

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## Notes

\*Participants have been renamed to protect their identity.

\*\*As noted in [www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census.aspx) [http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/ethnic-profiles.aspx?request\\_value=24743&parent\\_id=24726&tabname=#24743](http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/ethnic-profiles.aspx?request_value=24743&parent_id=24726&tabname=#24743)