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Bharatanatyam & Tassa and The Tales We've Lived

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Bharatanatyam & Tassa and The Tales We've Lived

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Dedication

For my parents who've sacrificed more than I can fathom. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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Introduction

Purpose of Storytelling

“All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose. This is why in the past it has been handed down by oral tradition,” writes Paul Thompson in his book *The Voice of the Past*. Culture is kept alive through storytelling by actively passing on traditions from one generation to next of kin. Looking at traditions alive today, origins can be traced back like DNA where history and lineage unfold a story of how a group of people evolved, adapted and grappled with life changing events.

In this paper, I aim to tell stories of those who continue to practice the traditions that their ancestors passed down. I hope to understand how repercussions of British colonialism and Indian nationalism of the 20th century influences *bharatanatyam* dancers and *tassa* musicians today.

Indian nationalism has a rather complex and precarious history.

“India's concept of nationhood is based not merely on the territorial extent of its sovereignty. Nationalistic sentiments and expression encompass India's ancient history. As the birthplace of the Indus Valley civilization, as well as four major world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism” (Acharya).

India is home to many belief systems and has an ethnically diverse population making it the second most populous country in the world. It is also home to 22 official languages, 121 dialects, and 270 ‘mother tongues.’ Within the last couple centuries India has sustained the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), the British East India Company (1600-1874), and the British Raj (1858-1947) which has resulted in an idiosyncratic concept of nationalism.

Bharatanatyam is derived from the Sanskrit words *bhava* (expression), *raga* (music), *tala* (rhythmic pattern) and *natyam* (dance) (“From Sadir Attam to Bharatanatyam”). It is one of the recognized classical Indian dance forms originating in southern India. This dance form emulates

the vibrant theatrical stories written in Hindu scriptures predominantly of *Shaivism*.¹ Today, *bharatanatyam* is performed and taught as the product of India's nationalist movement as an Independent nation, divorcing it from its correct origins. *Tassa*, is a drumming ensemble that has prospered significantly in Trinidad and now positively reflects the culture of west Indian Caribbean people. This nomadic drumming style has origins in Persia and a history in north India. It has extended the Indian diaspora to different parts of the world, particularly the Caribbean. Both *bharatanatyam* and *tassa* tell the stories of India's nationalism regime.

In Chapter II, I argue Indian nationalism allowed for the wrongful commercialization of *bharatanatyam*. In Chapter III, I argue that indentured servitude ushered persecuted Indians to cultivate a secondary diaspora, with the use of *tassa* for its exemplification of Indo-Caribbean heritage.

The depiction and appeal of *bharatanatyam* draws me to India's complex and controversial relationship with preserving and honoring traditional/regional dance forms on a national level. As a new independent country desperate to cultivate nationalism, I fear India never really protected traditional dance, and this is demonstrated through the "trans-nationalization" of *sadir attam* to *bharatanatyam* in the early 1900s.

I will open with a historical background of India and the context of *bharatanatyam*, as well as *tassa*. Chapter II explores *bharatanatyam* in terms of how it reflected India's newfound nationalism and global reputation/status. Chapter III dives deeper into *tassa*, as a relatively modern drumming ensemble of the Indian diaspora, and its contribution to the contemporary art world within the Indo-Caribbean community. The fourth chapter is an ethnography—a collection of interviews aiming to get a closer glimpse of *bharatanatyam* dancers, *tassa* musicians, and

¹ Shaivism is a major sect of Hinduism, devotees are devoted to Shiva, Parvati and Ganesh. Shiva is recognized as "Auspicious One," and is part of the trimurti symbolizing the destruction: greed, anger, and lust.

audience members. The last section will explore my experiences as a Trinidad-American bharatanatyam dancer and how these narratives changed my perspectives.

Chapter I

Indian Dance and Music From the “Chauvinist North and Carnatic South”

To understand music and dance in India, it is just as crucial to understand the significance of Hinduism as India’s oldest functioning religion, philosophy and culture. With nearly a 5,000 year old history, “Without Hinduism (in undogmatic and tolerant form) India is not herself” (Holroyde, 38). Prior to the first Muslim invasion in India 1,500 years ago, Hinduism was fully established with numerous scriptures, customs and philosophy including the *Vedas*, the oldest Hindu scripture, the *Upanishads*, the *Ramayana*—the most popular, and the *Mahabharata*.

Music and dance animate Hinduism as a religion and culture, the arts reflect India’s long and old history of exchange with neighboring countries and their respective cultures. *The Music of India* written by Peggy Holroyde (1972) includes a foreword written by Ravi Shankar where he candidly explains the roots of Indian music are found in the oldest Hindu scripture called the *Vedas*², establishing a very old oral tradition that is still memorized today. In Chapter 3 Holroyde distinguishes north and southern music as Hindustani and Carnatic music which will be referred to throughout the rest of this paper. In the south, Carnatic music has remained more so untouched from outside influences and conflict between Islam and Hinduism, as well as the British Raj, allowing oral traditions to survive thousands of years relatively unchanged. Hindustani music has long standing influences from Mesopotamia, Anatolia (modern day Turkey), Arabia, Slavic Russia, Tibet and China (85). Holroyde relays a typical South Indians argument being “Hindustani music has lost its purity,” and the integrity of that music lies in the hands of people with “chauvinist” portrayal of an unadulterated Hindu Indian (86). South Indians understand north Indians to have a diluted and washed out grasp on Hinduism, and still they (Northerners) regard their identity as original and authentic which without a doubt, is untrue. For thousands of

² The oldest hindu texts consisting of four large books, written in Vedic Sanskrit roughly 2000 BCE

years, India has had constant involvement with other peoples since the beginning of early Hindu thoughts. Starting with the Aryans, Persians during the Mughal Empire, Phoenicians, Greeks during the reign of Alexander the Great, the Jewish, Chinese, Muslims, and so on. And within the last 500 years, the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British have made lasting impressions that bring us to the topic of what music and dance in India mean now (85-6).

Prior to the first Muslim invasion in India 1,500 years ago Hinduism was fully established with numerous scriptures, customs and philosophy. During the course of the empire, the Mughals increased India's gross domestic product to 22% of the world's economy , developed a profound road system, standardized rupee as the official currency, and flourished agriculturally. (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, "Mughal Empire") During the first 700 years of Islamic rule in India, Hinduism still remained active and was widely followed. However, with the continuous growth of Islamic rule, many Hindu traditions were fossilized due to proselytism. (Holroyde)

Returning back to Shankar's foreword in *The Music of India*, "It is ironic to see the interest in our classical music that exist in Great Britain these days since in all the 200 years or more of association with India, the British never, ever took an interest and in fact they even looked down on it, thinking that our vocal music was like gargling [...]" (9). So why after centuries, did British thinkers post independence show interest in Indian arts? This newfounded interest began in the 1950s, shortly after India gained independence in 1945.

WHERE THEY DANCED: STATE PATRONAGE IN INDIA

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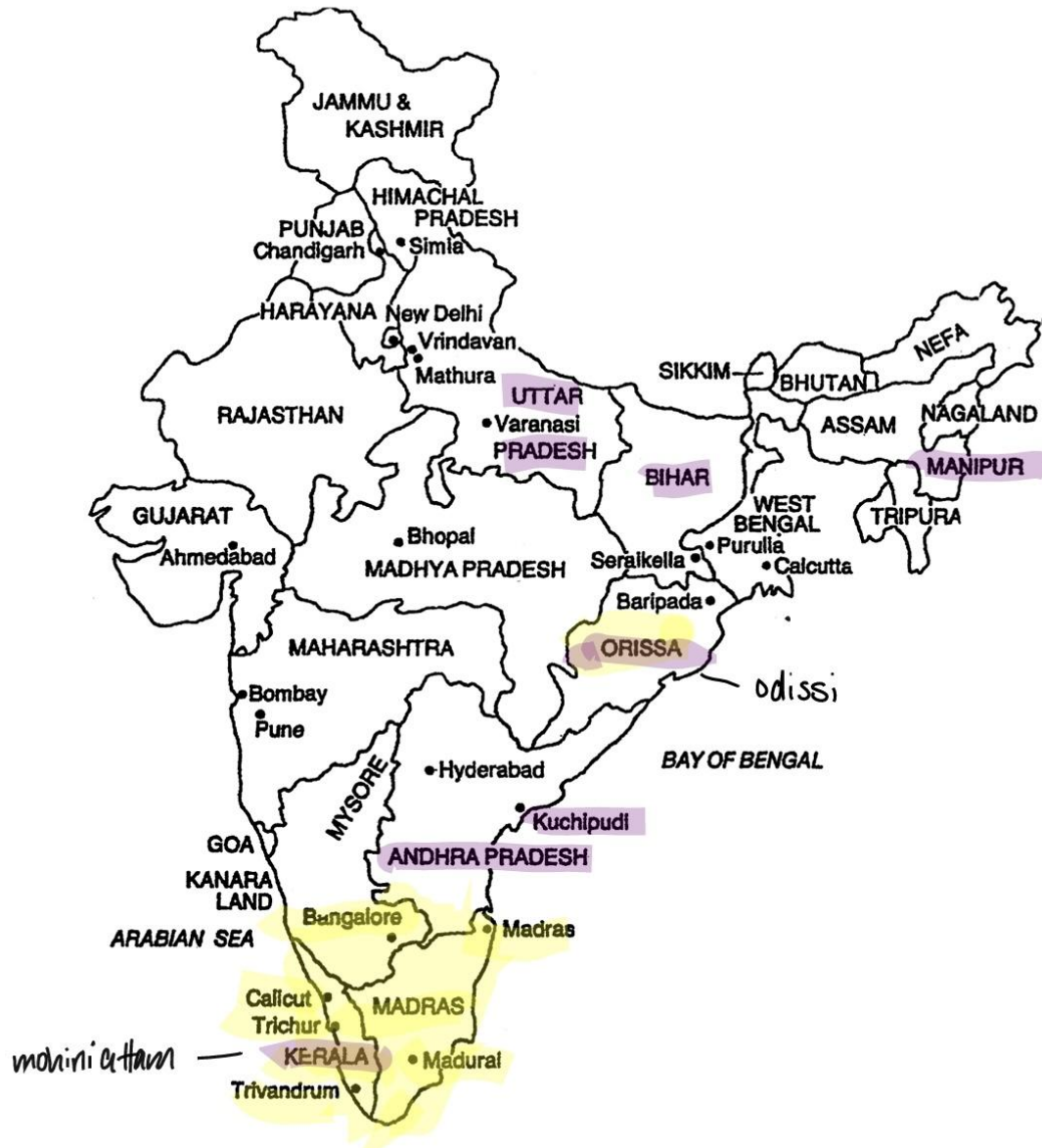


Figure 1: A map of India, with highlight regions of local regional dance forms courtesy of Shah, Purnima. "State Patronage in India: Appropriation of the 'Regional' and 'National.'" *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 25, no. 1 2002, pp. 127.

Chapter II

How the Limbs of Traditional Dance Were Excised and Propagated, From *Sadir Attam* to *Bharatanatyam* for National Acceptance

Classical Indian dance is an umbrella term for eight recognized traditional dance forms—*bharatanatyam*, *kathak*, *kuchipudi*, *mohiniattam*, *odissi*, *kathakali*, *manipuri*, and *sattriya*. All styles can be traced back to the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, a sacred text for Hindu performing arts which has influenced all traditional dance, music, and literary traditions of ancient India. My prioritized research focuses on the transition of *sadir attam* to *bharatanatyam*. For additional context, I elaborated on a few of the other dance forms. *Kuchipudi* originated from Andhra Pradesh, a region of southern India and is described as a drama-dance form (Shah 131). *Kathak* dancers, *kathak* meaning “story,” traveled through northern India and Pakistan animating tales from numerous Hindu epics including the *Ramayana*, *Vedas*, *Puranas*, etc. *Odissi*, originally called *Odisha* is one of oldest traditional dances of India, practiced by *devadasis* who’s importance will be explained below.

Traditionally, male dancers were exclusively “brahmin boys,” therefore upper class, and thoroughly educated in the *nritt* (technique) and *abhinaya* (art) of Carnatic music, Sanskrit, and Telugu canonical texts. Alongside, learning the dance, they were also trained to sing, as a form of *bhakti*³ towards Lord Krishna, who is a main deity and reincarnation of Vishnu in the Vaishnava⁴ sect of Hinduism (Shah 134). Traditional dance was part of a larger education, and now a fading practice. The structure of teaching changed with the rise of a predominantly upper-class woman-led dance form of *kuchipudi* for having a larger more “respectable” global audience, leading the traditional male focused dance-drama form of *kuchipudi* to consequently fade.

³ Intense devotion

⁴ One of major sects of Hinduism, where Vishnu and his reincarnations are supreme, followers prioritize their devotion to Vishnu.



Figure 2: devadasi dancers photographed by [Mohan Khokar](#)

Traditional carnatic Indian dance is also credited to centuries old traditions held by temple dancers who practiced *sadir attam*⁵, notoriously known as *devadasi*⁶ dancers in *Tamil Nadu*, labeled Madras in fig. 1. According to an article titled “The *Devadasis*, Dance Community of South India: A Legal and Social Outlook” *devadasis* were artists who devoted their lives to worship a particular deity and temple. They remained unmarried and were heavily respected and honored frequently for their divine duties. These women were responsible for the upkeep of the *murtis*⁷ that were bathed and clothed daily and embellished with flowers and fragrance. Throughout the day *devadasis* chanted and danced in the temples as an act of worship done privately away from visitors (Sharma 82-3).

“A Devadasi was meant to be revered; while she danced in worship, speaking to her or looking at her has been mentioned as a ritual offence in the sectarian texts that lay out the etiquette on blame in other varieties of indiscretion such as spitting in the temple, turning one’s back to the shrine, looking covetously at consecrated property, and so on. A Devadasi’s death was marked with an elaborate rite where she was granted life honours; flowers, sandal paste, and a garland were to be sent from the God of the temple. Unlike in other funeral processions, where no stops are to be made, in the case of a Devadasi, her pyre was momentarily placed on the floor near the entrance of the temple where the offerings were made to her.” (Sharma 83)

Following the “glorious golden days of Devadasis,” the revered and sacred identity of these women came to halt during the Muslim Invasion (12th to 16 century) as invaders destroyed Hindu temples leaving devadasis homeless and in need of jobs to earn a living. They were forced to perform for private parties often resulting in rape and prostitution to survive (Sharma 83). Now outcast by society, they completely lost their prestigious status and morality, fueling suspicions among European travelers who arrived in India after the fall of *devadasi* culture. They

⁵ Sadir is the traditional precursor to bharatanatyam practiced by devadasi dancers for centuries

⁶The *devadasi* community of south India are originators of a popular dance form called *bharatanatyam*. [The Devadasis, Dance Community of South India: A Legal and Social Outlook in](#)

⁷ In Hinduism, a murti is a sacred depiction of any given deity. Examples include statues made from clay, bronze or marble. Often they are decorated in colorful clothing and flowers, During religious service, offerings and prayers can be made directly to the murti.

suspected that these dancers were an abomination to the Indian religion. “French missionary Abbé Dubois who spent 30 years (1792-1823) in South India (wrote) ‘Once the devadasi duties were over, they opened their cell of infamy and frequently converted the temple itself into a stew. A religion more shameful or indecent has never existed amongst civilized people.’” (qtd. in Sharma 84).

British missionaries proclaimed *devadasis* were outright immoral, and the Western educated nationalists as well as Indian *bharatanatyam* activists who constituted the cultural elite of society fell in line with this view. By the early 1900s, *sadir* was cleansed from the impure hereditary practitioners and adopted by upper-class women and thus regional dances became institutionalized as a whole, by revivalist Rukmini Devi. *Sadir* was reconfigured to suit a ‘proper’ national audience with a new name: *bharatanatyam*.

The devadasi system grew more and more tainted and reflected poorly on Indian society. According to “The *Devadasis*, Dance Community of South India: A Legal and Social Outlook” from the *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*,

“The first success of the anti-*nautch* campaign was seen in the form of a despatch issued by the (British) Government in 1911 calling for nationwide action against *sadir* performances. This was followed by targeted legislative steps such as the enactment of the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act in 1934 by the British Government which criminalized the dedication of women to the temple, irrespective of whether or not she consented to such dedication.”

In 1947, two years after Independence, these temple dancers were colonially outlawed and then abolished by The Devadasi Act.

Controversy and extinction of the Devadasi system led to exclusively upper-class men and women practicing these regional dancers. In a research paper by Avanthi Meduri titled, “Bharatanatyam as a Global Dance: Some Issues in Research, Teaching and Practice” she explores the life and career of Indian *bharatanatyam* dancer, Rukmini Devi in relation to her

influence on Indian nationalism. Meduri argues the “global and local remains” of bharatanatyam were misconstrued by researchers from the beginning (11).

Global and local researchers of bharatanatyam are respectively classified as two different modernities: colonial modernity and ‘revivalists.’ The colonial modernity was understood as liberal and dismissive to local production and representation of 19th century Indian dance. ‘Revivalists’ also known as Indian nationalist, were undermined by colonial modernity for their defensive and protective approach regarding the local culture and practitioners of traditional south Indian dance (Meduri 12). She also argued in her doctoral thesis that the traditional devadasi dancer and her dance *sadir* were “transnationalized,” as bharatanatyam during British colonialism (12). Meaning, *sadir* is not *just* the precursor to bharatanatyam. Qualities of *sadir* were reworked and renamed under the term bharatanatyam to reflect India’s modernity (14) while creating a market for it.

Rukmini Devi (1904-1986) was a central pioneer of globalizing bharatanatyam. She was a brahmin woman (upper-class) heavily influenced by the Theosophical Society, where she gravitated towards their philosophy and fell in love with arts from around the world (Meduri). She also met and married George Arundale, age 42, at her young age of 16 (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Rukmini Devi Arundale”). The couple traveled the world (1920-33) learning about art and music, and during this time she learned ballet from Russian dancer Cleo Nordi. She then returned to India and devoted the rest of her life to the revival of bharatanatyam. She learned *sadir* from traditional male teachers and female devadasis dancers (Meduri 14). After being rejected by the Theosophical society for her art, she and her husband opened their own school *Kalakshetra* in 1937, dedicated to dance and music located in Chennai. She invited the best dancers, prestigious musicians and teachers to be a part of her organization and changed the

face of Bharatanatyam entirely (14). In the early stages of *Kalakshetra* she cultivated a pure rendition of bharatanatyam free of eroticism known as *Sringara*, one of the nine *rasas* (aesthetics) found in Indian arts (dance, music and theater). (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Kalakshetra Foundation”). *Sringara* emulates intense feelings of anger, lust, jealousy, fear, compassion, and sexual intimacy between a man and woman (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Sringara”). Devi found *sringara* too grotesque, especially with the recent damnation of *sadir* and *devadasi*, so she focused on polishing bharatanatyam creating a style noted for its angular, strict, and upright movement of the arms and legs, likely influenced by her ballet studies (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Kalakshetra Foundation”). Her student Leela Samson (1951-) is one of the most outstanding bharatanatyam dancers the world has seen and a true visionary for Kalakshetra. Her seasoned performance of [Alarippu](#) displays the qualities Devi desired for bharatanatyam (WildFilmsIndia).



Figure 2: Image of Rukmini Devi posing courtesy of [The Dance India newsletter](#)

Figure 2: Tanjore Balasaraswati dancing with expression courtesy [The Hindu newsletter](#)



Her style was openly criticized by Tanjore Balasaraswati (1918-1984), a very prominent Bharatanatyam dancer who was a 7th generation devadasi dancer who advocated for traditionalism when it was being revived in the 1950s as Bharatanatyam (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Balasaraswati”). Her derivative of Bharatanatyam known as *Tanjore* court style is revered for continuous practice of the *rasa* (facial and bodily expression), which can be seen in a 1976 [performance](#) (ಸೌರಭಂ). In response to Devi’s Kalakshetra style she

said, “the efforts to purify Bharatanatyam through the introduction of novel ideas is like putting a gloss on burnished gold or painting the lotus” (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Kalakshetra Foundation”). On the contrary, in response to Balasaraswati, Indian lawyer, revival activist and *sadir* dancer, E. Krishna Iyer honors Devi for saving *sadir* from the brink of extinction, “it (the art) saw a renaissance only when she started to dance [...] she (didn’t) created anything new that was not there already” (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Kalakshetra Foundation”).

Both Balasaraswati and Iyer's opinions are justified, and I agree with both of them, even Rukmini's reasoning to leave out *sringara* in her style has integrity. I don't necessarily agree with Meduri for describing Rukmini as a discursive failure (11). All three dancers wanted the same thing, to preserve a dying art and share it with the rest of the world. Their approaches are all different, perhaps controversial in Rukmini's case, but the duality of styles and versions of bharatanatyam and the other seven classical dance forms means more legacies and stories from the past were kept alive. These dancers took it upon themselves to redefine nationalism for the betterment of traditional dance, during a swelling period of disdain for sadir and devadasis. I argue that the trans-nationalization of sadir to bharatanatyam, considering its purification and western influence that Devi advocated for, contradicts the true essence of sadir—being a humble sacred act of worship for a particular sect of devoted Hindu women. Devi liberated Bharatanatyam globally in the 1940s, allowing it to be learned and practiced throughout the world ensuring national acceptance. While I don't agree with the purification of the dance, it may have been the cause for bharatanatyam's survival.

Chapter III

The Migrating Drum We Love

The *tassa* drum is a medium sized kettledrum, roughly eighteen inches in diameter, hung from the neck using makeshift rope out of linen cloth resting at the lower waist. The drum is played with a pair of thin, flexible sticks with the tips similar to that of xylophone mallets. Accompanied by a large and heavier cylindrical bass drum called *dhol* played with one hand and a thicker mallet. *Jhānjh/jhāl* are small brass cymbals that complete the ensemble measuring six to twelve inches in diameter (Manuel 136). An ensemble usually includes two *tassa* players, one *dhol* player, and one *jhāl* player. “The ‘cutter,’ or lead *tassa* player, directs the ensemble through a series of standardized *taals*, or rhythmic calls. Additionally, the cutter adds flair to the music through improvisation, often using rapid-fire rolls and ear-splitting “shots.” The cutter can only flaunt their skills provided the other players maintain rhythmic structure, and strong base for the cutter to improvise off of (“Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa”). Playing *tassa* doesn’t rely on formal eastern music theory nor is there sheet music that players use during practice or performances. See this [performance](#) by T&T Sweet Tassa to see their roles come together.

According to “A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour,” by Hugh Tinker, “Beginning in the 1830s and lasting until 1918, *dhol-tasha* was taken around the world by Indian workers, mostly from present-day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, enmeshed in a global scheme of indentured labor in British, French, and Dutch territories.” In Trinidad and Tobago, and in other Caribbean countries, *tassa* is a drumming ensemble predominantly performed by men. These drumming traditions can be traced back to folk drumming, today known as *dhol-tasha* primarily practiced in northern India and Pakistan.

Though *tassa* became widely associated with North India's musical reputation that then spread to the Caribbean, "the Arabic-script orthography of the word (*to 'e sīn-he*)" (Manuel 137) indicates *tassa* has ancient Persian or Arabic roots. The *tassa* drums itself migrated to India during the Mughal Empire—a Muslim dynasty that spanned from early 16th century to the mid 19th century. The Mughal Empire is significant for bringing Muslim rule to most of north India, and having the Indian subcontinent under one trading jurisdiction. North India became a breeding ground for new art and music as the cultures mixed. According to Peter Manuel, there has been a lack of scholarly attention on the North Indian *tassa* movement when in fact, by the mid-1800s, the city of Lucknow⁸ in North India became the epicenter of *tassa* ensembles. For example, in the Kolkata area "tassa drums are part of the *dhāk dhol* ensembles that play during Durga Puja"⁹ (138). Drawing from Abdul Halim Sharar's (1860-1926) first hand experience as an Indian historian, playwright, and essayist known for artful descriptions of his hometown Lucknow, "the *tassa* groups were among the ensembles that "were surrounded by admirers and stood in one place for hours on end, issuing challenges to all and sundry to rival them at playing music... Among these musicians, the *tasha* players were the most skilled and were always introducing innovations into their music." (Manuel 138).

Unfortunately, after the Siege of Lucknow (May 30th- November 27th, 1857), the *tassa* scene changed in much of Northern India. The instruments haven't received much attention nor has *tassa* been revived back to its previous prestigious reputation. Lucknow today is a historic attraction paying homage to the British Raj with grand architectural buildings from that period.

Gratefully, *tassa* was kept alive in the Caribbean via indentured servitude. Primarily, Indians

⁸ Lucknow is the capital of Uttar Pradesh in northern India. It is known for retaining its British Raj architecture. With the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire and rampant wave of British education, Lucknow nurtured an explosion of great poetry, music, dance, and art.

⁹ Originating from the Indian-sub continent Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival celebrating and honoring the goddess Durga. Traditionally, her triumphant victory against the evil Mahishasura is commemorated, and a healthy harvest is offered to honor Durga as the mother of bravery and creation.

came from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar arriving on May 30th, 1845 with a total of 225 adults who traveled a total of 33,000 km over a 103 day period. (Agrawal)

The first wave of Indians who came to Trinidad must've included drummers and craftsmen skilled enough to play and build these instruments suitable for local festivities. It is very likely that tassa players who traveled to the Caribbean could've been directly from Lucknow or close surrounding areas but it is still unknown *who* specifically brought and reignited tassa as an art form. In addition, it is more likely than upon settling into their new communities so far away from home, more drums were replicated using organic material including goatskin, clay and mango wood (Manuel 139).



Figure 5, image of Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana
 Courtesy of <https://www.researchgate.net>

*Muharram*¹⁰ celebrations in the 1860s were accompanied with *tassa* in both Trinidad and British Guiana, making it likely that these first wave of drummers were Muslim (146). It is in Trinidad where *tassa* regains its popularity among both Muslims and Hindus alike, as well as the Afro-creole community who were already on the island. After the last shipment of Indians in 1917, there is no evidence suggesting that Indian Trinidadians had any further contact with drummers from India, meaning *tassa* culture grew and developed on its own entirely separate from the motherland (146-7).

Consequently, Trinidadians and all other West Indian nationalities view themselves as such, not Indian. Trinidad is a secondary diaspora that is connected to the India diaspora through *tassa* drumming. It is a vessel that connects west Indian culture and art with India. As already mentioned, only remnants of *tassa* remain after the British Raj and it's in these European colonies where a new culture flourished for Indo-Caribbeans.

Wherever these drummers landed, be it Trinidad, Suriname or British Guiana (see fig.5), *tassa* drummers found a way to maintain their artistry and culture away from the motherland. Unfortunately by the 1970s *tassa* had withered away in both Suriname and British Guiana—leaving Trinidad as the last export of a sizable *tassa* scene. Today, Trinidad is home to hundreds of *tassa* groups ranging from local to professional organizations. One of the lead organizations, “Trinidad and Tobago Sweet Tassa” was founded in 2004 by Lenny Kumar in Princes Town, Trinidad (“Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa”). Kumar comes from the Boodoosingh Family, who's ancestry traces back to a *tassa* drummer from India. Family records state that this drummer's son John Kaur Singh started a family *tassa* group in 1917. With generations worth of skill and knowledge passed down, Lenny Kumar has formed one of the most successful international *tassa* organizations (Manuel 147).

¹⁰ Muharram is the Islamic celebration of the new year, it marks the first month of the Islamic calendar.



Figure 6: Boodoosingh and Senior Members of Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa Group
 Courtesy of [About - Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa](#)

In recent years, tassa groups have emerged in Suriname and Guyana imitating Trinidadian drummers and today, in New York City, Trinidad and Guyanese immigrants live alongside each other in South Ozone Park where tassa is synonymous with both cultures proportionately.

Indo-Caribbeans (West Indians) are now the largest ethnic group in Trinidad. My parents, and their families call Trinidad home and have for two centuries. Trinidadian culture is a fusion of multiple peoples: Indian, Afro-Caribbean, indigenous people (Caribs & Arawaks), Chinese, and mixed race people. It pleases me that we can all enjoy each other's foods, music, customs,

and continue to create new adaptations to older traditions. Tassa is something that is noticeable West Indian, and represents a category of Trinidad's musical palette and heritage.

Chapter IV

Tassa is *Down to Earth* Bharatanatyam is *Life on Earth*

Preface: To Tell a Story is to Emote

In the following section, I embark to tell stories, experiences, and lessons learned from people in my community—near and far. The act of learning to play an instrument, or learning to dance continues a legacy that is often bigger than us. To think that thousands of years ago, someone was learning from the same scriptures that I've learned from is remarkable. This section will take a direction without the entanglement of other academics and their respected theories.

A true artist does what they do out of love and admiration for *art*, and their creation becomes a story. A story that reflects our truths, what we believe, what we hold important and without it, history would not exist. Storytelling is a gateway into the past, giving us an idea of who we were so that in turn, we can understand and cultivate who we want to be today. We tell stories in defense of what we believe is ours, we tell stories to understand our purpose.

I conducted casual interviews with an old dance partner, a local tassa player, and my parents. My goal was to catch a glimpse of their lives in relation to the dance and music that embodies them. I believe art is personal and a lifelong expression. Lastly, I will include my own testimonies as a bharatanatyam dancer and enjoyer of tassa music.

Interview with Tara

“You know, it’s embarrassing to say that now. But back then I felt like we were always competing with each other for her approval. If you were put in the front I thought there was something wrong with me. This was so good! I didn’t know you felt it too.”¹¹”

I was most nervous leading up to my interview with Tara. Only now, I realized we had a very particular type of relationship with a dynamic that never carried through with the many relationships I’ve built following our time dancing together. Headed towards the Ganesh Temple, in Flushing, Queens. I dreaded the two hour commute, the cold, and the anticipation of seeing her after so many years. It was a Thursday afternoon, and my hope was the basement we practiced in would be vacant. And countering my willful thinking, I *also* hoped that the basement was filled with people because having this conversation meant going back in time to comb through the golden days of *Bharatanatyam with Mathy Pillai*. As I walked towards the temple, I inhaled the familiar smell of Indian curry, and murmured Chinese from around the corner.

The *Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam Temple* is run by a non-profit organization called the Hindu Temple Society of North America. In short, it is commonly referred to as the Ganesh Temple as the core deity is, you guessed it, Ganesh. It’s a beautiful mandir that started off humbly in 1977 by one man named Alagappan who wanted the growing population of Indians in NY to have a fit place to worship. Dr. Uma Mysorekar has served as the leader of the temple since 1980. Recognized for her work she was invited by Obama among others of varying faiths for the national prayer service *during his* 2009 inauguration (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Indian Nationalism”). This same small elderly woman oversaw all of our annual performances. Upon research for this project, I was amazed to learn more about her successes for NYC’s Indian Hindu community.

¹¹Maheshwar, Tara. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Queens, New York January 2022.

When I made it to the temple, it felt *warm*. I walked through like I was there yesterday, when I was last there in May 2019. I took the stairs quietly to the basement and was met with the large room I consider a friend, and to my slight demise, it was dark and empty. When Tara and I found each other, we hugged and small talked for a bit to let the nerves settle. The sound of our bare feet hitting the marble floor and the way our voices echoed in the empty room brought a nostalgia I didn't know was there. Our voices matured and our faces molded into something similar to that of our parents. We've grown up.

I briefed her on my project, and explained my angle with the conversation we were about to have. Our conversation ended up being about three hours long filled with laughter and sadness as we talked about our early dance careers and why we eventually stopped. For the purpose of this paper, I distilled the interview into three phases categorized by stages of life. Each phase points to the different stages of our dance careers from ages four/five to teenage-hood.

Tara spoke with her hands a lot, and relatively fast.

T: We don't live far from here, I don't know if you remember.

S: Yes I remember going over to your house a few times (chuckles)

T: (laughs in response) Well, my parents would just bring me and my brother for puja on Sunday mornings. And somehow I found myself in this dark cold basement! (laughs) Like what the hell! I didn't even know what was happening, I was just here and said well 'okay, I guess I will listen to the lady dressed all fancily'.¹²

Tara's family is north Indian, with parents who immigrated here in the 90s. At home she speaks a couple of languages including Hindi, Gujarati, and Maithalum. Her mother put her into dance without consulting her and at the time she was having a positive experience. Before the temple was reconsecrated entirely in 2009, it was indeed dark and cold. I remember going back after the remodeling when I was 7. Every inch of the floor was marbled, the walls were white, a blanket of modern lights covered the ceiling like stars, even the bathroom floors were heated, and

¹² Maheshwar, Tara. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Queens, New York January 2022.

dancers were finally given a changing room. From her willingness to accept her fate at such a young age I sensed that this was a common practice in her household, but I didn't want to dig any deeper on that matter. And like her, I also found myself in that dark and cold basement.

T: It was such a long time ago, it's hard to remember—but what I do recall was how *private* classes felt before they redid the whole place. It was like our little world. Because nobody wanted to be in the basement, nothing else was really going on at the time I think. I remember my first day fondly though. We sat down on the floor and Ms. Mathy taught me the mudras. I still remember them. And then she taught us simple foot work and then arm movements. Very simple times. [...]

S: How did the environment change for you after the remodeling?

T: The remodeling really did something for all of us I think. Good and bad, but mostly good, mhm. Eventually, I was making friends with the others my age and it was a lot of fun. We'd run around a lot and get in trouble if we were fooling around in the bathrooms. It ended up getting so busy too, remember?

S: Uh-huh I do, I do. Continue.

T: We had to section off the rooms for other groups—for singing and dancing. And talks were held, and prasadam¹³ was dished out for all of us at the end of the day. I remember racing with you guys to the line, ahaha. Because the sweets would always run out. We'd all eat on the floor with our hands. Packed in there. A whole community down there. Well.. down *here!* (exclaiming with her hands)

S: Going back to your first day, on the topic of firsts. Do you remember your first performance?

T: Uh. I remember wearing blue and orange, I think that's what it was? I was nervous too, it was my first time on a stage like that. The lights were blinding too, and I could hardly see a thing. I think this first show was just preparation, nothing was really expected of us back then.¹⁴

She remembered more than I thought. The first dance we performed was a simple Ganesh dance suited for us newbies. The nerves that day were high, I have one photo from that day of me posing in front of a Ganesh murti smiling ear to ear. Tara elaborates on the first two years of dancing with our dance teacher Ms. Mathy. She explained that it gave her a sense of community as she went to an elementary school that had mostly east Asian kids. Language connected her to her Indian friends and family and simultaneously separated her from the people at her school. Most of those her school peers spoke two or three languages—English, Chinese, Mandarin or

¹³ Prasadam are the offered foods, sweets, and drinks to deities during worship. They are later enjoyed by devotees during a feast.

¹⁴ Maheshwar, Tara. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Queens, New York January 2023.

Korean, none of which she spoke. Her only friends were from dance and her mom's social circle of "aunties" and their girl children close to her age.

By middle school dance started to become more disciplined, our expectations sky rockets once we started practicing a traditional dance called *Alarippu*.¹⁵ This is typically the first official dance Bharatanatyam dancers learn. Stronger eye coordination, concentration, and muscles in the neck, arms, hands, back, legs, and feet are rigorously tested and trained. The movements are in beat with the traditional music that accompanies it.

T: Again and again she made us redo it over and over. It was frustrating, because we couldn't see ourselves. I wish we had a wall mirror, I think that would've made the process easier. Or maybe, this was just part of it. I don't think they had mirrors to look into back then anyways. If one of us messed up we all had to redo it. Sometimes if I hear the music (accompanied music to Alarippu) I immediately straighten up, like someone is watching me. But that relief when we were all getting it felt really good. The sense of accomplishment gave me confidence and a sense of individualism. Visitors of the temple who found themselves in the basement would peek through and sometimes watch as we practiced. Part of me knew I could do things most people couldn't.

S: How did that frustration fuel your drive? Or did it get in the way?

T: I think sometimes the frustration would get in the way, especially when things were starting to get more difficult. I even wanted to stop. But my mom talked to me, and told me if I wanted to get good I had to be stronger. Like mentally, I had to work on that. [...] We had to hold poses for like an hour and she'd walk around pushing my arms up if they were falling. And telling me to 'sit! sit' if our legs weren't bent enough.

S: I remember that so well, oh my god.

T: (shaking her head) Yup, I remember us, like me and you. I think that's when we started to bond—was during the classes that made us really sore. It maybe gave us something in common.

S: I'm so glad you mentioned that because that's something I'd like to go into more. Us becoming unspoken dance partners.¹⁶

The early stages of her dance career ran almost parallel to mine. I learned that our similarities are what drew us closer as we got older. Ms. Mathy's relentless nature carved us into strong dancers. From this time forward, Tara and I were often partnered up to practice and rehearse. Her ability to memorize movements and reteach them served me well because I tended

¹⁵ Alarippu is a Tamal (south Indian region) meaning 'flower budding' and is the first official dance bharatanatyam dancers learn in their careers. It is also the 'warm-up' portion for a dancer's performance including six official dance routines lasting multiple hours.

¹⁶ Maheshwar, Tara. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Queens, New York. January 2023.

to need help in that area. My flexibility was charming as well. I jumped at the chances to do cool poses and what I did, so did Tara. Two peas in a pod. Our friendship was part child-like and part professional. Furthermore, this system we developed worked in favor of the rest of the group. The aesthetics of bharatanatyam is how effortless and flawless it's meant to look, symmetry and sameness is mandatory. And as a group, unison and seeming identical was something we continuously improved on throughout the years. Our efforts eventually landed us in front of the class because of our quicker progress and attention to detail. As young teens we were among a small handful that stuck through from 2007.

Tara's favorite performance was a fusion dance we did in honor of Ganesh Chaturti¹⁷ in 2014, if I remember correctly. The piece was about a young woman who lost her way, and eventually found her way back to Ganesh, who symbolizes the removal of obstacles, strength, humility, and is portrayed to be an astounding student in scripture. The preparation for this piece took over a year, the routine changed frequently until "perfection" was achieved. This dance was out of the ordinary compared to the strictly classical training we had. Beginner, junior and senior dances all took part including visiting members of a male bharatanatyam group.

T: I don't like being emotional, but I can't tell you how precious those years were to me. I don't know, maybe it's because where we're sitting and it just brings back so many memories. I even wanna cry thinking over the struggles. Ms. Mathy was so loving even though she was tough on us. It was all for us. There was this time... can I share?

S: Yes, yes! Of course

T: Remember that big performance we did that fusion piece, it was a Ganesh dance for Ganesh Chaturti in the fall. And Yosh had that huge Ganesh headpiece on. Right before we went on stage, it was so late and we've been in costumes for hours, and the makeup was so heavy. We were in this small room behind the stage listening to our turn. Ms. Mathy clasped her hands together and said a prayer over us. She blessed us. And after the performance she met us on the stage after the curtains (closed) and hugged me so tightly. [...]¹⁸

S: [...] Hm, wow this seems to be a special moment for you, why was it important for you to share with me?

¹⁷ Ganesh Chaturti marks the celebration of the birth of the Hindu deity Ganesh to Shiva and Mother Parvati.

¹⁸ Maheshwar, Tara. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Queens, New York January 2023.

T: I have some guilt about leaving so suddenly. I feel like I let the rest of you down a bit. Knowing what I know now, I wish I could go back and handle things differently. I just want you to know, especially you and not because you're probably gonna write about this and me. I still cherish the good times, and I don't take it for granted. The girls and what we did together is very special.¹⁹

I remember squeezing her hand for a moment trying not to cry. She pulled at my heart with her vulnerability. Tara was not alone in her pent up guilt. I don't remember Tara's departure quite well, but her *absence* was something that dwelled on me for a couple of years until I myself took a break during high school. Tara's role in my dance career was significant, she kept me motivated and made me a better dancer and her friendship helped me fit in with the rest of our crew. I believe having a dance partner is similar to a life partner, at least in Bharatanatyam the skills we develop are for a lifetime of dancing granted the body allows it. Traditionally, bharatanatyam dance partners can carry on dancing together for decades until old age. I recognized this conversation was beginning to fill the missing pieces of my dance career, I was learning where things may have faltered for me and Tara as well.

The Ganesh performance she referenced was a turning point for me for different reasons. Myself and the other junior members had a smaller role that came on later on in the performance. Watching the senior dancers practice and perform that year was evidence that talent and skill isn't just something you're innately gifted with, it is something that needs to be cultivated. I watched the audience awe and clap throughout. Their routine had a modern twist that still maintained a strong bharatanatyam foundation. I share Tara's sincerity from that performance with a sense of nostalgia and inspiration.

Since this was my first time seeing Tara since she left, her vulnerability took me by complete surprise so I obliged her. I told her how much I missed her after she was gone and that maybe I lost some hope without her.

¹⁹ Maheshwar, Tara. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Queens, New York. January 2023

As we went on talking, Tara opened up more to talk about her struggles with dance and how it eventually led to her stopping. What was meant to be a break from school turned into never going back.

S: I think we blossomed in dance though, right?

T: Oh my—around middle school. Things were just getting harder to juggle between school, clubs, extra tutoring, and dance.

She found herself becoming more and more busy. High school applications in 8th grade were a very stressful time for her. Her parents pushed her to take the *SHSAT*, (Specialized High School Admissions Test) that would land her into one of NYC specialized high schools. Stellar grades and complete attendance at school was non-negotiable for herself and older brother, and a pathway in STEM was also strongly encouraged. Tara ended up going to Townsend Harris, one of the top schools in NYC surpassing the rank of all specialized high schools. The stress and her requirements never seemed to cave and eventually dance couldn't fit inside her busy schedule.

T: Ugh, I wondered if I didn't quit, you know.

S: Me too. Seems like I left a life behind.

T: Yeah, yeah.

Our conversation ended on a sad note met with acceptance. Tara is like most Indian American girls, going to school, working, and paving her adult life. Her history with bharatanatyam almost seems like a secret past life, but she has not forgotten lessons it taught her. And I certainly will not forget her.

Interview with Dave

“I can't, I can't, I can't see my life without tassa, no way. That would be a dull wasteful life. Never quit. Neva.”²⁰

Getting in touch with tassa players was quite a challenge in January. In the colder months, most bands head to the south, typically Florida to pick up more gigs. The winter usually means less weddings and outdoor events thus killing the pockets of tassa players trying to make a living. I got in touch with Dave Persaud through my father. He wasn't the musician I initially wanted to speak with, but tough times called for me to be less picky. Dave ended up being a good choice after all, he was straightforward and full of energy, love and willpower. He was born to Trinidad-Guyanese parents, not an unusual pairing in Queens, NY. After immigrating from Trinidad in 2002 with his uncle at the age of 6, Dave was reunited with his parents who immigrated a year or two beforehand. His earliest memories were that of old school reggae, soca, chutney and the thick sing-songy accent of his family. His life up until America was simple. No school, just living and playing.

D: Being here for the first time, *shucks*²¹ It was like looking at the world upside down. It was like I was in—what's that movie with the white boy and he goes to a factory and crazy shit keeps happening to him?

S: (laughs) Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?

D: Yes, that's the one. It was like that, but I never left the freaking factory. Mom said 'we are here to stay.' Pretty sure I cried, but you know, I got over it. *It not so bad ovah here.*

I felt bad for young Dave, but his cartoonish character and charisma made me laugh like a schoolgirl, it was *embarrassing*. Dave and I met at a small breakfast spot in the neighborhood during the morning time. The cold would surely keep any crowd away, giving us some quiet to really talk. That did not happen. The morning rush hour brought more people in and out of the

²⁰ Persaud, Dave. Interview with Shivani Balkaran. January 2023

²¹ Trini slang for the word “damn” or “crap”

store than I had anticipated. We opted for a cold brisk walk instead. This ended up being the best idea for someone like Dave. In the open air he spoke louder and acted out different people he talked about. His charisma was contagious, and his energy level for the early morning was about average. Recording the conversation was a challenge while walking but whatever I was able to salvage served little value. Much of what Dave had to say was upheld by his visual presentation. I am a visual learner, which made my conversation with Dave the easiest to transcribe later, which I did on paper as soon as I got home. This was the most informal interview out of the bunch for this project, but the most fun. Initially I thought the lack of structure would result in weak content, but it really just pushed me to approach Dave's story differently.

D: The first time I heard tassa, I was dis high. [measures up to his waist]

S: How young were you?

D: I don't remember but I'll tell you what. It doesn't matter. Everybody asks me that. But to me, all I know is that I am really into it. I didn't have a care for school and I was a bad kid. I never listened, used to get licks²² all the time. I didn't care about anything, you know. And when I asked my dad to get me a drum, that's when I started behaving. Believe me!

S: Ah, so now you had something to work for, I see. Little you finally learned to listen!!

D: (laughs) Yeah, exactly. That's when I became of age. That's when I became serious. I had to do well enough in school. And I had to behave at home.

So, I don't know what age Dave started playing tassa, because according to him the tassa drum was the epitome of all his desires that changed him for the better. He is very driven by his desires and once he sticks to something he can become almost obsessive. Dave gave me the impression that his father was the stricter figure at home. In fact, he hardly mentioned his mother except for mentioning what a hard time he gave her, especially when he decided not to go to college.

D: I don't think my mom understood it for a while. She thought I was just wasting time, and maybe I was. She'd get on when I didn't come down for dinner. Saying I was ungrateful. You know how it is.

²² Trini slang for beaten or hit as punishment

S: Oh yes I do. I think Trini moms take their like housewife responsibilities so seriously because they don't just provide because it's their job, they do it to ensure their hard work reaps benefits. Like stability and structure is important to them, Like if I spent hours cooking I'd want my family to come down and eat. The courtesy is probably what she expects from you.

D: Hm, yeah that makes sense. We're good now though. All is well in the Persaud family!

S: Of course! You're too happy to be from an unhappy family. (laughs)

D: Family is everything to me. All I do, with tassa and playing all about. It provides for them.

S: I see, so when did your mom start coming around?

D: Well, for one I stopped fighting with her. And my dad and I agreed if tassa isn't working out for me. I'd go to trade school or community college to start. So she was on board for that.

S: And everything worked out?

D: Praise God (clasps hands) it did... *cuz I don't have d head for school, nah.*²³

Once again, he did not fail to make me laugh despite the tension of the subject. He has a carefree nature that showed his enjoyment for the life he made himself. Being family oriented is one of the best qualities he worked on throughout his teenage years. Like most, he went through a rebellious phase that made him stubborn to anyone's advice. His shallow mentality changed after it came back around to *him*. People in his neighborhood started to gossip, and an outburst of a typical rowdy teenager turned into something much more.

D: I definitely had my faults, but people—HERE! Like to gossip too much. It's one thing about our community that needs to change, man. People love to get into your business and spoil it. And they twist it. Lie. Like there's nothing else better to do.

His tone shifted and I could tell he was serious. He was not wrong though, the west Indian community in general can be very toxic. Events or qualities that may reflect poorly on one's reputation can easily land in the wrong person's possession that quickly turns into a nasty version of the game Telephone. He learned that family matters couldn't be on public display and he knew who he couldn't trust. Unfortunately, sometimes it's your own kind waiting to stab you in the back. The young tassa player seemed to be the type of person who learned from experience and not word of mouth. Eventually Dave and his family moved on from this situation and were able

²³ Translated to: not having the skill or mentality for school

to mend their relationship with one another. The unity of his family is a source of his pride and strength and it reflects in his passion for the art.

Dave started learning tassa at *Sudama Mandir*²⁴ in South Ozone Park, after Sunday morning service. He recalls a local band of drummers who wanted to spread their roots by working with mandirs in the neighborhood. This is where some of Dave's real training began.

D: It was like school, and a little like learning a sport. We were taught to respect the drum and each other and we learned how to care for the instruments before even learning how to play them. We practiced in a large room kinda like a dojo. [...] Lined up in rows with the instructor in the front. Mostly it was repetition, and teaching by mouth. Books were used sometimes, but everything was already inside me. I feel like I taught myself. [...] I'd play for hours and hours and my ears would ring. I used to have to wrap my fingers beforehand to protect them. It's hard to explain, but I felt most like myself. I *became* myself. I knew this was it for me. At the time, I just wanted to stay in that room, alone or whatever. I was content.

S: Dude, you gotta write a book, what the fuck—*wow*.

Sounding superstitious is a tendency I stay far away from—but, I believe, backed by nothing but my gut, that Dave was *called* to play tassa. He explained his journey in a way so raw and natural, I wished everyone could hear him speak. Even after so many years, he spoke so sincerely of his learning stage with grace and appreciation. I know other tassa players who've become very cocky with status, but Dave has certainly put that mentality behind him.

One of his favorite gigs was down in Florida a couple years ago for a wedding. It was actually one of his band mate's cousins who was getting married and Dave's group was sponsored to play for them. Hindu/west Indian weddings are usually a three or four day event involving separate premarital celebrations for both the bride and groom, a Hindu ceremony that officially weds the couple, followed by a party-like reception.

D: I like watching people celebrate their lives because I'm always down to celebrate with them. It's what we do, we want to provide a service for our community, keep our culture alive. I get to meet a lot of new people. I may not remember every single one of them, but I know they'll remember me if we can give them a good time.

S: Do you ever feel like 'not in the mood?' How do you keep your spirits up?

²⁴ Mandir is a Hindu place of worship, synonymous with the term 'temple.'

D: Yeah, yeah. Like anyone else, not always happy. But we try to be professional. Nobody wants a pissy tassa group at their wedding or birthday party. We could easily ruin someone's occasion like that.

S: That's good professionalism. What made this wedding in Florida so special?

D: Oh my god! (laughs) We got so drunk at that reception it was hilarious. We don't usually mix in with the families we perform for, but because of the association this one was different. It was perfect. The wedding camera got us all. I have that footage somewhere, so I should watch it again.

S: What about the association made this experience unique?

D: Well, I guess we weren't just entertainers that night. The crowd really loved us, and we became guests of the wedding. So, the plan is always to bring celebration to a wedding. But those people celebrated with us. We broke the rules. (laughs)

The separation between performer and audience in this case is far from stringent. Confidence and optimism of the performers amped up the crowd beyond their expectations. I can visualize it, I can almost imagine myself there. Experiences like this one is what keeps people like Dave doing what he loves. The game is unpredictable, exciting, and keeps him sane. He explains that tassa has helped him stay out of his head and out of trouble, and aided him with his relationships throughout life. In all, it has made him a better son, friend, and soon to be husband.

Interview with my father, Ramadhar

“And it [dance and music] also connects me to the energy that we, all human beings, share. You know the energy that we all have inside of us. The energy that can’t be created or destroyed. It helps me connect to that.”²⁵

Ramadhar is a difficult person to read. Snippets of his life spill out of him when I least expect it, and it is often things I’d last expect it. When we sat down for the interview, he asked again and again: *Are you sure I am the right person to speak to?* His tough exterior and obsessive hardworking personality seems bruised. I instantly take to heart his skittishness and understandably his nervousness. I can sense he feels unprepared and unknowledgeable.

Keeping it simple, I asked him what comes to mind when you think about tassa, after a long awkward pause he replies “... Celebration (?)” like he is unsure with himself. This is when I knew this wasn’t going to be an easy conversation for either of us. His reluctance met with my desire to learn about his life resulted in me almost having to pry. Here I should include that my father does not have a formal education, he was a farmer by trade prior to immigrating to NYC in 1989. From childhood he farmed rice and sugarcane alongside his 12 other siblings. He was the last generation of Trinidadian men and women who were drastically impacted by the sugarcane industry.

[“Okay, what about celebration? in what sense.”

R: it's like...um—weddings. When someone arrives.

S: Are there other celebrations that you associate with tassa? And when—how do you feel about dancing to tassa, like what are some feelings you have when you see people dancing to it?

R: well, growing up in Trinidad and seeing the adults dance to it as a kid. It's like the male, especially the men when they arrive and leave a Hindu wedding. They have a wild dance, very strong. The man and woman’s side have like a dance off. Like they are dominating each other. “Who can really dance?”²⁶

²⁵ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

²⁶ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

My dad hones into an aspect of tassa that older people pay more attention to than those of who are younger.

Teenagers and young twenty year olds get swept away with the surface of tassa—the loudness and the hype it ensues at weddings. What we don't realize is the competition. Why compete with one another during a wedding? Isn't the point to unify both sides? I asked him to explain.

Sometimes they're trying to send a signal. If the girl's side is stronger or if the boy's side is stronger. [...] to my knowledge, way back, before there was electricity. and there was no microphone and there was no speaker. The tassa was designed to make a lot of noise, so you can hear it from a very far distance. They use it not only for celebration. They also use it for sending signals.²⁷

His mentioning of no electricity and microphones reminded me of the world he came from and how different it is from mine. My dad is from a small poor village in south Trinidad called St. Mary's where running water and modern toilets meant "they had moved up in life." Growing up the bare necessities required daily hard work, making the natural world his harsh and yet greatest teacher. "Common sense is not so common these days," is something he utters almost daily. Ramadhar explains that tassa drumming is an announcement to the world.

R: "When you hear it you only think of one thing now, right?"

S: "Yep, weddings. That's the first assumption these days isn't it?"

R: "Not every west Indian rally, or concert, or *fete*²⁸ will have tassa, but every wedding does."²⁹

Tassa has become synonymous with weddings in my culture. In our neighborhood, we can hear tassa from blocks away and subconsciously we acknowledge there is a wedding happening.

Sometimes if it's close enough, everyone on the block steps outside in front of their houses and watches, recording and dancing as well.

²⁷ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

²⁸ A fete is party similar, consisting of loud music, dancing and typically alcohol and food is served.

²⁹ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

It's an interesting phenomenon, tassa celebrates the joining of two people and their families, and in turn we celebrate the tassa being played. Even outsiders are invited by the signal tassa emulates to listen in and observe. I'm reminded of something my mother told me as a child, "it takes a village to raise a child," and I guess it takes a village to get married too! My west Indian community, my family, and my parent's hometowns all have similar qualities. We act in service to one another, providing what we can for others so we are also taken cared for by those around us. This way of life is definitely taken more seriously in my parent's hometowns as it's harder to carry these qualities as an immigrant without the family you were surrounded by for generations. But tassa reminds us of what *home* is like. The music is nostalgic for many older people, which I talked more about with my mom.

On the topic of dancing to tassa, the conversation shifted towards my paternal grandfather.

Well my dad is a local dancer. everyone would say he was very skillful and very, he had a lot of art in dancing. Very skillful. He was a professional dancer, within the local...(community). He drew a lot of crowds and he danced classical.³⁰

My grandfather Ghoolbie-Harry is a notorious spectacle on my father's side of the family; sadly known for his abusive behavior towards his wife and children. Someone I associate with the bearer of wrongdoings also had a very charismatic reputation in his community. My grandfather is not someone I've judged lightly, but it was endearing to hear my father talk about the better sides of him.

S: How would he draw the crowd?

R: He was like Michael Jackson, in those times. Very special, and skillful with his moves.

S: Did he do things that were different from other people?

R: Oh yes, he could've moved his neck like a cobra, and he couldn't move his shoulders, his hands,, his waist, his legs in many different ways. The sound of the drums. Very skillful.³¹

³⁰ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

³¹ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

My grandfather was described as energized and very focused on his performance and would hardly engage with the audience. Crowds would form around him in a circle, cheering him on with a smile and laughter. Kids would run from whatever activity they were doing. Jumping out from inside the house or the lagoon (rice farm) if they were working– they'd drop everything and race to where the music was.

My grandfather created an environment that relieved stress for his community along with bringing people of all ages together. He was even on the local news for his dancing in the 70s according to my dad's sister.

This interview brought to surface some family connections. Like my grandfather, I am a dancer too. It's unknown if my grandfather sought out any formal training or if he picked up skills simply by associating with dancers. I was reminded of how little and even my father knew about my grandfather apart from this domestic life. Nevertheless, I think it's special to know I've picked up where he left off, continuing his legacy. Maybe... it's destiny. As the conversation progresses Ramadhar becomes more outspoken. He cares a lot about dance as it has become an important part of his life now living in America, away from the majority of his family. Dancing has helped him connect with his culture and soul. Casual dancing is a natural part of west Indian celebrations no matter your skills, and my dad, like his father, also knows how to draw a crowd.

R: I think I actually picked up a lot of his style. I don't know. What people usually say. It's in the blood. It's in me.³²

Perhaps it's a spiritual thing? Can dance be hereditary? Is it a gift from our ancestors? Coming from a culture/religion that believes in reincarnation is it really a stretch? We weren't really able to come up with a definitive answer, but we did agree that maybe it's beyond our control.

³² Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

And it [tassa] also connects me to the energy that *we*, all human beings share. You know the energy that we all have inside of us. The energy that can't be created or destroyed. It helps me connect to that.³³

What he said is symbolic to one of the main principles in Hinduism. The idea that our soul will return to a larger source over the course of many lives as we strive for inner peace—known as *samadhi*. We are servants to the music we create, so that it can show us our way to enlightenment. Keeping in mind, not every west Indian is Hindu, and even so, not all Hindus are as devout as my father, but it still makes perfect sense following his trail of wisdom. But, I don't think I *fully* grasped what he meant.

In the same vein, Ramadhar left me with *another* abstract comment:

What I understand as a human, and as a plant, we are not that much different from an animal, a bird or a dog. We were basically under the same blanket of stars. We all live on the same big rock. We still all use the same five senses. Some of us recognize it, probably some of us do not.³⁴

My father amazed me with this comment. If we pay close attention and are sensitive to the world around us, we can learn to trade human ignorance for humility and contentment. We sit in awkward silence for a while, as I try to figure out if maybe we've gone too abstract with our thinking. Not wanting to cut his train of thought, I decide to let him continue and see where it takes us.

S: Do you think tassa tells a story?

R: Yes. Yes, to my knowledge I think it goes back way back to the Stone Age. I don't know what age, but I think it comes from a long time ago. The song (music) still has a lot to do with the ancestors. Because it's a skin, a tree that is used to make that instrument, and you have to use your hands to build it, and you have to use your hands to play it. And all your senses react to it, so it's very organic, as you said.³⁵

When Ramadhar references the Stone Age, I didn't take this literally. The creation of tassa, from sourcing the material to build the drums, to playing it evokes something that is

³³ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

³⁴ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

³⁵ Balkaran, Ramadhar. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

spiritual, human, and incredibly down to earth. Perhaps, this is the story he was referring to. The humble, *down to earth*, creation of tassa. For at least the last 100 years, tassa has remained true to its original form, with limited variation in drum patterns and rhythmic style, giving it a reputable distinct identity from other west Indian drums. Literally, it *is* the music our ancestors played and listened to.

Most of the music we consume today is off of our phones, where the audio has been carefully recorded, engineered, and balanced. There is a rawness to live music that affects more than just your ears. Tassa is lively—the vibrations can travel for blocks alerting, drawing an obnoxious amount of attention from the village. And at the scene, the ground absorbs some of the shock, and you can feel the remnant frequencies travel up your legs to the top of your head. The drumming *attacks* you as it pulsates through the air, the ground, and the body. Your bones vibrate and it feels like your heartbeat is competing with the earth's. Perhaps this is the “energy that connects us all,” that Ramadhar was talking about. This organic production of drumming and its relation to spontaneous and habitual dance wakes up parts of the brain that neurologists have been studying for years. It's not new that music/vibrations can improve our mood almost instantly. For instance, vibrational therapy has been studied for its healing properties for mental illnesses, migraines and other conditions including addiction, and Parkinson's. (Bartell, Lee, and Mosabbir) Ramadhar was definitely onto something powerful.

Interview with my mother, Pratima

“It really is just such a happy time. It’s really like victory, you’re celebrating something that is wonderful. And all those festivities, the non-religious one, a wedding, the birth of a child, birthday, or an anniversary, celebrate milestones in people’s life. And drums just give you a sense of that height of happiness.”³⁶

I spoke to my mom a couple days after my interview with Ramadhar. Pratima is the exact opposite of her husband. She is quick on her feet, articulate, and loves to talk. Her outgoing personality offered new insights to the questions I asked, which were follow ups from my previous interview with my dad. While I was thoroughly grateful for my father’s insight, I felt somewhat unfulfilled. I wanted more descriptions, contexts, names, and memories that would tether and strengthen Ramadhar’s philosophical thinking. My parents are a team, even in their thinking they are two halves to a whole.

The first ten minutes of our chat was dedicated to flushing out the competitive nature of dancing to tassa prefaced by Ramadhar.

S: “What’s that like, what’s the scene?”

P: “Uh, mostly it starts with a group of people dancing. And then some people just get tired and they form a circle. You know when people start dancing to tassa. It gets very competitive, we use the term “whine,” and that’s when you really know how to roll their waist. And they know how to dance to the beat of the music, and sometimes it’s a showdown for the best dancer. And we’re not just talking about rolling the waist, we’re talking about artistic movements. Right, specifically from Indo...India– style. Like you did mention, bharatanatyam is also a form of expression. so tassa *is* also that form of expression and it does come down to who those last few people remaining, who dances to the beats of the drummers. And sometimes those dancers go on for a long time, ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, depending on the dancers too, the tassa group will continue playing until they get tired, or when the dancers give up.”³⁷

³⁶ Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

³⁷ Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

Asamyuta Hastas



www.niruththafinearts.cjb.net

Figure 7: Hand mudras for Bharatanatyam courtesy of <http://natyakriya.blogspot.com>

For players and dancers alike, the most important qualities to possess are confidence, longevity, and the ability to adapt. There is an unspoken underlining progression of events once tassa starts playing at an event. “Whining,” is a dance move that stems from the Afro-Caribbean influence on west Indian local dancing. We’ve made it suitable to our taste with arm/hand and neck movements similar to the mudras³⁸ (see fig. 7) of classical Indian dance. But west Indians approached them with fluidity contrasting with the rigid temperament of bharatanatyam. In my opinion, the average west Indian who dabbles in dance, exhibits movements that imitate dance numbers found in classic romantic [bollywood songs](#) between the male and female leads. These theatrical performances dramatize eye-contact, sensuality, and sexual tension between the interests which can be seen in the link. At the functions I’ve attended, amateur dancers charm one another by displaying their skills which are very Bollywood-esque. The biggest difference I’ve seen is the lack of a routine, eye-contact, and the lack of a steady dance partner. As seen in [this home video](#) of wedding guests dancing to tassa, you are encouraged to improvise by dancing with whomever compliments your vibe and typically older folks dance with each other and younger people follow suit. The most popular mudras performed include numbers 1,12,13, and most of all 20, however the local usage of these mudras don’t carry their symbolic traits.

Pratima elaborates on the joy tassa brings during celebrations, as it represents triumphs over darkness and evil energy. She said that the vibration is meant to bring good energy to a place and ward off negativity and ignorance. She taps into her spiritual nature like Ramadhar, which to my understanding she believes that tassa plays an important role in cultivating good

³⁸Mudras are the ABC’s of classical Indian dance, they are hand positions symbolizing Hindu deities, animals, nature, and how they are performed in relation to facial expression and body movement direct the story being told.

karma.³⁹ I led into this particular belief and asked her to elaborate more on the importance of tassa. Her reply was as follows:

“Like all artists, they have their instrument. Personal choice. They are drawn to specific instruments, and I feel like in all cultures and societies music is a huge part of everyone’s culture and so tassa reinforces that pride, Indo, east Indian pride. Keeping our traditions alive, and it’s a very specific expression of music. So I think that is really one of the soul purposes of tassa drumming. Passing down those traditions from generation to generation. I was going to say that there is also a form of identity.⁴⁰”

Pride and identity is a treasure everyone should feel for their culture and country. As a first and second generation household living in today’s American society I’ve always had mixed feelings where my loyalty and pride resides. To Pratima, cultural pride and being a strong Hindu go hand in hand. To be proud is to embrace the family you were born into and protecting it is the moral thing to do because one’s relationship with their family is what determines pride in one’s country and culture. Family is most important to Pratima, the family she left behind in Trinidad and the family she’s built from scratch in America. Being the proactive parent she is, she enrolled her only child in classical Indian dance at the age of 5, sent her to Hindu camp during the summers, and taught her how to perform pujas at home. She ensured the next generation of her family grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by people from her home country so the values taught at home would be reflected in the world her daughter lived in. Pratima hoped that the knowledge she learnt would hopefully one day come full circle where I’d do the same for my children.

As Pratima said straightforwardly, “bharatanatyam is also a form of expression. so tassa *is* also that form of expression.”⁴¹ The art we make is an expression of who our people were, are currently, and will become. Old and new. I’ve always thought of tassa as being some-what temporary, even shape shifting. This art craft became a mainstream source of identity for

³⁹ Karma is the Hindu concept of cause and effect. One is rewarded or punished based on the moral integrity of their actions.

⁴⁰ Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

⁴¹ Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

colonized west Indians and will innately change over time as Indo-Caribbean people continue to move to the US, Canada, and Europe.

P: Yes, fifty years is pretty young when looking at history. But looking at it from five decades of my life, it's still going strong. It's a beauty. And actually tbh, if I reflect because it just dawned upon me that it's more prevalent now actually. Because back in the day when I was a young kid, tassa was something you sort of seen on what people would call a very very unique occasion. A special occasion, because again it could be that there weren't many tassa players. Now there are a lot of young kids that are embracing these different styles of drumming. Also um, that's a point. that more and more people, maybe or maybe not. The concern is there if we lose it in time to come.⁴²

I found it interesting that tassa is more prevalent now. I actually assumed tassa was more popular in our home country. Given Trinidad's recent history, independence was only gained in 1962, a few years before my father was born. Trinidad's recent history with colonialism means we're still in the reimagining stage of our culture, identity, and art. My parents were the first generation to have not grown up during colonial Trinidad. Their experience with local music and dance as children were performed by people who recently fought and won their rights. That said, Independence allowed people to express their freedoms publicly without scrutiny. Rejoicing through dance and music as a community regained their sense of self, pride, and culture. My mother expressed anxiety of losing Indian heritage in Trinidad. On one hand she is strict with her religious music and prayer but is much more liberal with food. The Caribbean lifestyle is complicated, we are trying to connect with our mother diaspora while adapting to the cultures we've evolved alongside, creating an entirely new diaspora in the process.

With the intention to get a story out of her before our time was up we ended with exchanging some of our most memorable tassa moments. Here are two of hers:

I remember tassa being played at friend's weddings. Um two friends got married and they had the tassa drummers there, and it was just a celebration. And you danced with your family, with strangers at the wedding. It was just wonderful, and sometimes it got very competitive, who can

⁴² Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. *Via Zoom. December 2022.*

dance the longest, who can go down the lowest, it really is—the energy is, the beat of those drums really moves your feet. Even if you're sitting down, it just builds. It has that tempo and memento inside, you just have to get up and move. Recently, I went to a wedding, and they had tassa there. And everybody, it doesn't matter if you can dance or not, you just get up and move to the beat of the music. It just gives you such inner joy. Um, like all music, it just puts you in a different mood. it takes away your stress, it elevates you.⁴³

And even here, where I live here on Liberty and there are weddings. People play tassa, they walk on the streets on the pavements. And do you know how many times my husband and I danced right out in front of our yard? Because we heard the drums, and it's something that just moves you. Whether you're a trained dancer or not, just move to the beat. There are times when people have house parties (chuckles), and they play like a tassa recording on their jukebox...⁴⁴

Her memories left me smiling, as I watched her tone fluctuate with excitement as she relived those precious moments. My lasting impression from interviewing my parents was how grateful I became to them, my grandparents, and ancestors for their continuous efforts to keep our culture alive so today, we can freely enjoy it, appreciate the strength, courage, and soulfulness of tassa. Pratima values her Trinidad culture dearly and would feel partially lost without it. Being locally involved in music and dance is therapeutic for her. As an American, she is pleased to have found her community that has grown massively since the 90s. A home away from home.

⁴³ Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

⁴⁴ Balkaran, Pratima. Interview by Shivani Balkaran. Via Zoom. December 2022.

Conclusion

Where to Fit Between Prides

My father was raised by a simple devoted mother, Basmatia. She was a housewife, vegetarian, spoke some Hindi, and practiced whatever she remembered of Hinduism. The imprint she left on my father was strong, resulting in my unusual upbringing. Growing up, my hair was kept very long in a single braid. It was my signature look if I do say so myself. As I entered elementary school, my dad got a skirt made for me that was far longer than I wanted. It stopped closer to my ankles than to my knees and little Shivani was mortified. I absolutely hated the skirt, and never wore it no matter how much he pleaded with me. I always found a way to just wear my regular pants. Growing up, the words “you are a nice Indian girl, you’ll dress like one,” followed me when I was being *too* American. In tenth grade I chopped my hair off in the bathroom sink using craft scissors. All the other Trini and Guyanese girls in my neighborhood had shorter bleached hair, didn’t have to pray, or wear *ugly* long skirts. I was at odds with the qualities expected of me.

My time working with Tara over this past winter changed my attitude on dance. Prior to taking a break at the end of 9th grade I was struggling to find my place in bharatanatyam and find joy in my practice. I was the only one who didn’t speak multiple languages and wasn’t from India (directly). I felt like an imposter, pretending to be like those around me when I knew we were very different from each other. My experience as a Trinidad-American practicing bharatanatyam has given me a closer look of the Indian community in NYC which has always made me feel critical of our differences. As Mungal Patasar said, “You take a capsule from India, leave it here for a hundred years, and this is what you get.” The West Indies is like a real-world time capsule of fruitful identities born from a tragic history of slavery, indentured servitude,

Dutch, British, French, and Spanish colonialism. The past is the past, but it catches up to me when I visit my mother's hometown, Bois *Jean Jean*, and the beach town named *La Rufin*. Or when we eat *callaloo* and *tumtum* for lunch, a West African dish brought over to the Caribbean via slavery. We've shared each other's languages, food, music, clothing. We've fought one another *and* for one another, creating a country that our mother countries don't recognize.

At every wedding I've attended. I hear the tassa roll in and watch everyone dance as I stay firmly planted in my seat unable to get my body to move. Because once again, I feel like an outsider but among my *own* people, among my own culture. Why? I've been to Trinidad almost yearly, assimilating to my extended family's way of life. It seems so easy to get up and dance for everyone else, but me. This has haunted me for a long time. I was trained to dance by "the real Indians" in an establishment glorifying who the "real Hindus are." My identity has never felt *real* because I didn't know where I belonged. While I am strongly connected to Bharatanatyam and Indian Hinduism, I was raised West Indian.

I'd like to ask Patasar, "So what happens when you take a young Trinidadian girl and drop her in India, metaphorically speaking, what do we get then?" This is my experience, trying to make sense of my Trinidad heritage I was born into and the Indian culture I've adapted to. Who am I supposed to be? The Indian dancer or the west Indian girl? I was baffled by how differently we prayed, and at the vastness of the Ganesh Temple. I dreaded the constant questioning, "What part of India are you from? What languages do you speak?" and my response 9/10 times was met with dismay. "My parents are from the Caribbean, we only speak English," grew more and more exhausting to say each time. It felt like members of the institution I worked so hard for honored me as a dancer but looked down upon me as a person.

As a pre-teen, I felt ashamed of the little mandirs in my community, which were often remodeled houses or rented basements. I was frustrated with my ancestors for not knowing Hindi. As a teenager, most of the girls I danced with from '07 were gone for reasons I don't know, and my chances at feeling at home with these new girls felt impossible. With my own insecurities, I started to lose sight of why I was dancing to begin with. Who am I dancing for? Myself? My parents? Do I even like this anymore? The questions never ended and my interests in bharatanatyam faded.

The remainder of high school, I believed I'd never fit in with either community. I'd never be American enough, Trini enough, Indian enough, or Hindu enough. I felt my parents wanted to mold me into a perfect Indian doll when in reality, they wanted their American child to know where they came from and showed me beautiful parts of our Indian heritage that Trinidad doesn't exhibit. Dave Persaud's story reminded me of what was most important. If you do what you do with love and respect, it is enough. My identity crisis, while inevitable, complicated a very simple truth: I am American. I am Trinidadian and I am a classical Indian dancer. They do not need to contradict, because I am proof they can exist together. I have allowed myself to be okay with all the cultures that influence me. Interviewing my parents put my lingering frustrations to rest. I've begun to understand the choices they've made for me and couldn't be more grateful, because in the end we are all trying to tell our own stories.

Figure 8. Image of Shivani Balkaran, in a Bharatanatyam posture, Barnegat NJ (2019). Photograph taken by Pratima Balkaran.





Image 9. Image of Shivani and crew in Bharatanatyam posture, Queens, New York (May 2019). Photographed by Pratima.

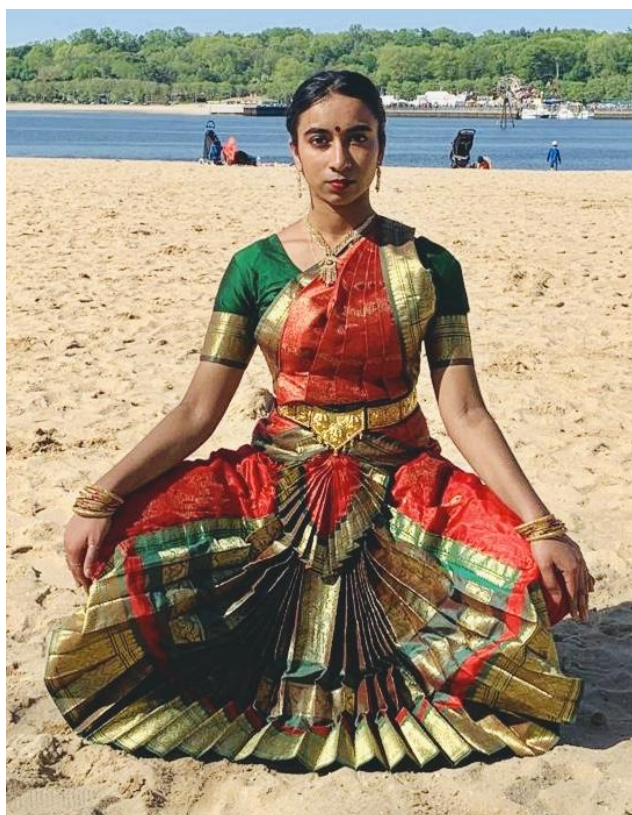


Figure 10. Image of Shivani in Bharatanatyam posture, Queens, New York (May 2019) Photographed by Pratima.

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