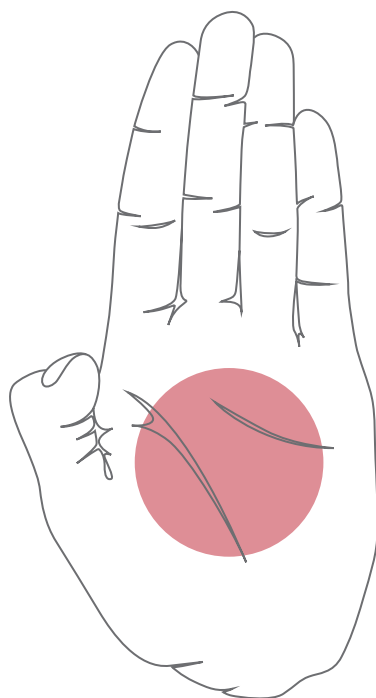


Emotions, Melody and Rhythm

Photographic Documentary on Bharatanatyam by Reino Erasmus



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Pictorial Documentary on Bharatanatyam by Reino Erasmus

Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is quite possibly the oldest classical dance tradition of India.

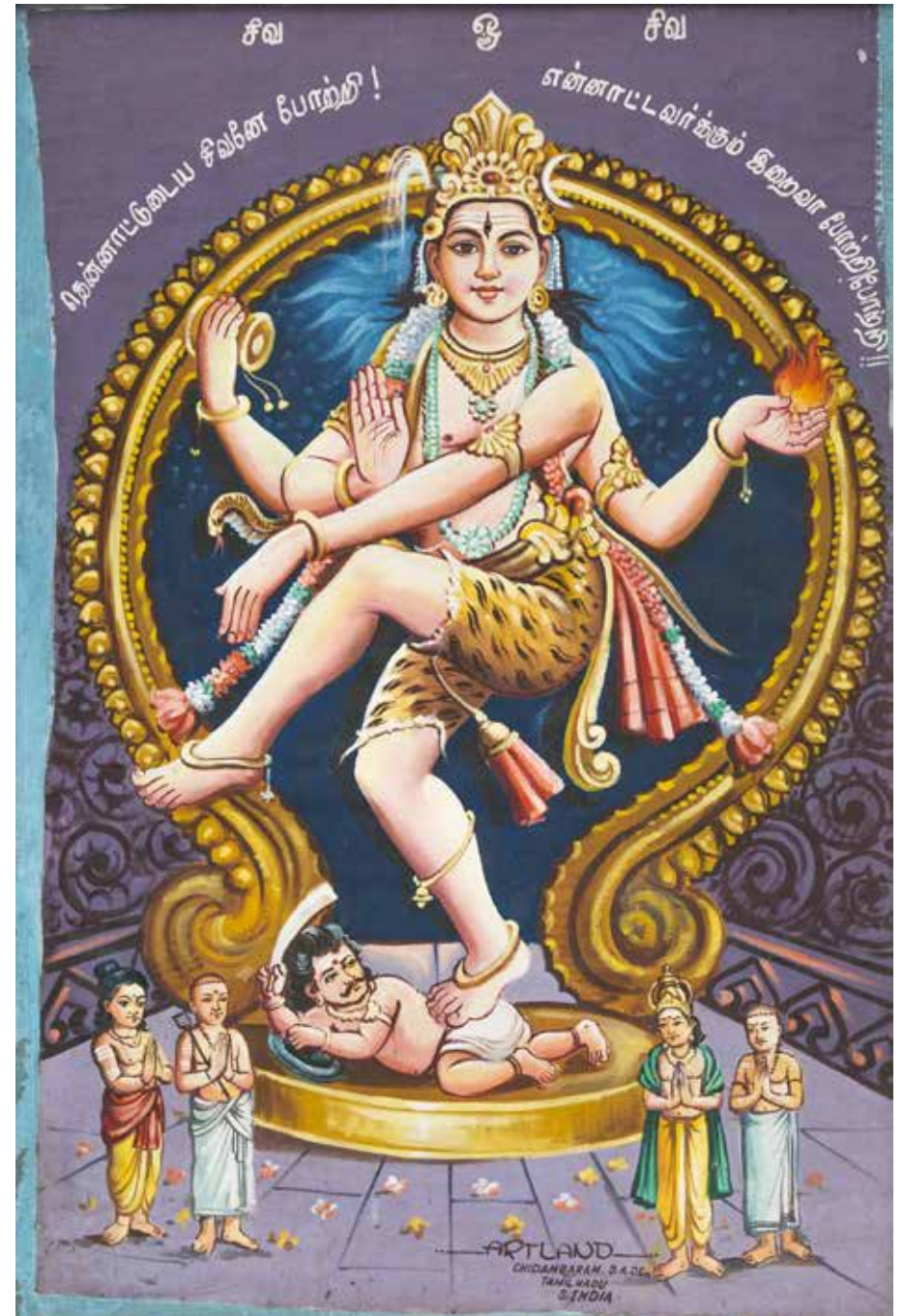
The term Bharatanatyam is a compound of two words; Bharata and Natyam. The tradition states that the word Bharata is a mnemonic, consisting of "bha"—"ra"—"ta". The "bha" stands for bhava (feelings, emotions), "ra" stands for raga (melody, framework for musical notes), and "ta" stands for tala (rhythm). The term Natyam is a Sanskrit word for "dance".

Thus the compound word Bharatanatyam connotes a dance which harmoniously expresses "bhava, raga and tala" (emotions, melody and rhythm).

As a major genre of Indian classical dance that originated in the Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu and neighbouring regions it has traditionally been a solo dance that was performed almost exclusively by women, and expressed Hindu religious themes and spiritual ideas, particularly of Shaivism, but also of Vaishnavism and Shaktism. The dance has traditionally been a form of an interpretive narration of mythical legends and spiritual ideas from the Hindu texts.

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Bharatanatyam's theoretical foundations trace to the ancient Sanskrit text Natya Shastra, of which its existence by 2nd century CE is noted in the ancient Tamil epic Silappatikaram, while temple sculptures of 6th to 9th century CE suggest it was a well refined performance art by mid 1st millennium CE.

The Bharatanatyam style is noted for its fixed upper torso, legs bent or knees flexed out combined with spectacular footwork, as well as its signature sophisticated vocabulary of sign language based on gestures of hands, eyes and face muscles.

The dance is accompanied by music and a singer, and typically her guru is present as the director and conductor of the performance. The performance repertoire of Bharatanatyam, like other classical dances, includes nritya (pure dance), nritya (solo expressive dance) and natya (group dramatic dance).

Bharatanatyam remained exclusive to Hindu temples through the 19th century, was banned by the colonial British government in 1910, the Indian community protested the ban and expanded it outside the temples in the 20th century.

Modern stage productions of Bharatanatyam have incorporated technical performances, pure dance based on non-religious ideas and fusion themes.

This publications aims to document the significance behind the different body postures, hand gestures and garments worn by both male and female Bharatanatyam dancers.

Male dancer: Darshan Purohit
Female dancer: Aarti Narotam





An example of temple jewellery on a female Bharatanatyam dancer. The dancer shows the necklace using the Katakamukaha gesture, which means the 'Opening a Bracelet'. This signifies actions such as holding a necklace or a garland, the pulling of bow strings or talking and seeing, amongst others.



Bharatanatyam dancers traditionally wear ankle bells to accentuate their highly intricate footwork. These are blessed by the guru (the dancer's teacher who may also serve as director and choreographer) and are a key element of classical dance. The painted hands and feet adorn and accentuate the energy sources of the dancer.





(Far Left) A female Bharatanatyam dancer depicting the playful and mischievous God of Love, Lord Krishna playing the flute with a peacock feather in his hair. Note the dancer's left hand in the Murgasheshra, which in this context represents the flute and the right hand in the Mayurakyo gesture, which the peacock feather.

(Centre Left) A female Bharatanatyam dancer depicting Lord Shiva in the form of the cosmic ecstatic dancer, Lord Nataraja. Lord Shiva is venerated as the Destroyer of evil. Note that the dancer's right hand maintains the Patakas hand posture, which is used to depict amongst others prowess, an ideal king and to grasp a sword. The left hand maintains the Dola hand gesture which depicts amongst others passionate love. The full meaning of this posture can be construed as "Fear not, for I am here. All evil is overcome".

(Left) A female Bharatanatyam dancer depicting Mother Saraswati (the Goddess of Knowledge, Wisdom and Music) holding a traditional stringed instrument called a Veena, whilst sitting on a lotus flower. Note her right hand in the Katakamukaha gesture while the left hand is in the Chatura position. The Chatura hand position is used to indicate states such as artfulness, aesthetic pleasures and sweetness among others.



Left: A two-handed variation of the Hamsapaksha hand mudra - "Wings of a swan".
Right: Padmakosha hasta hand mudra - "Lotus bud".



A male Bharatanatyam dancer performing one of the 9 Navarasas or emotional states used in classical Indian dance. In this instance he portrays the state of Hasya (laughter).

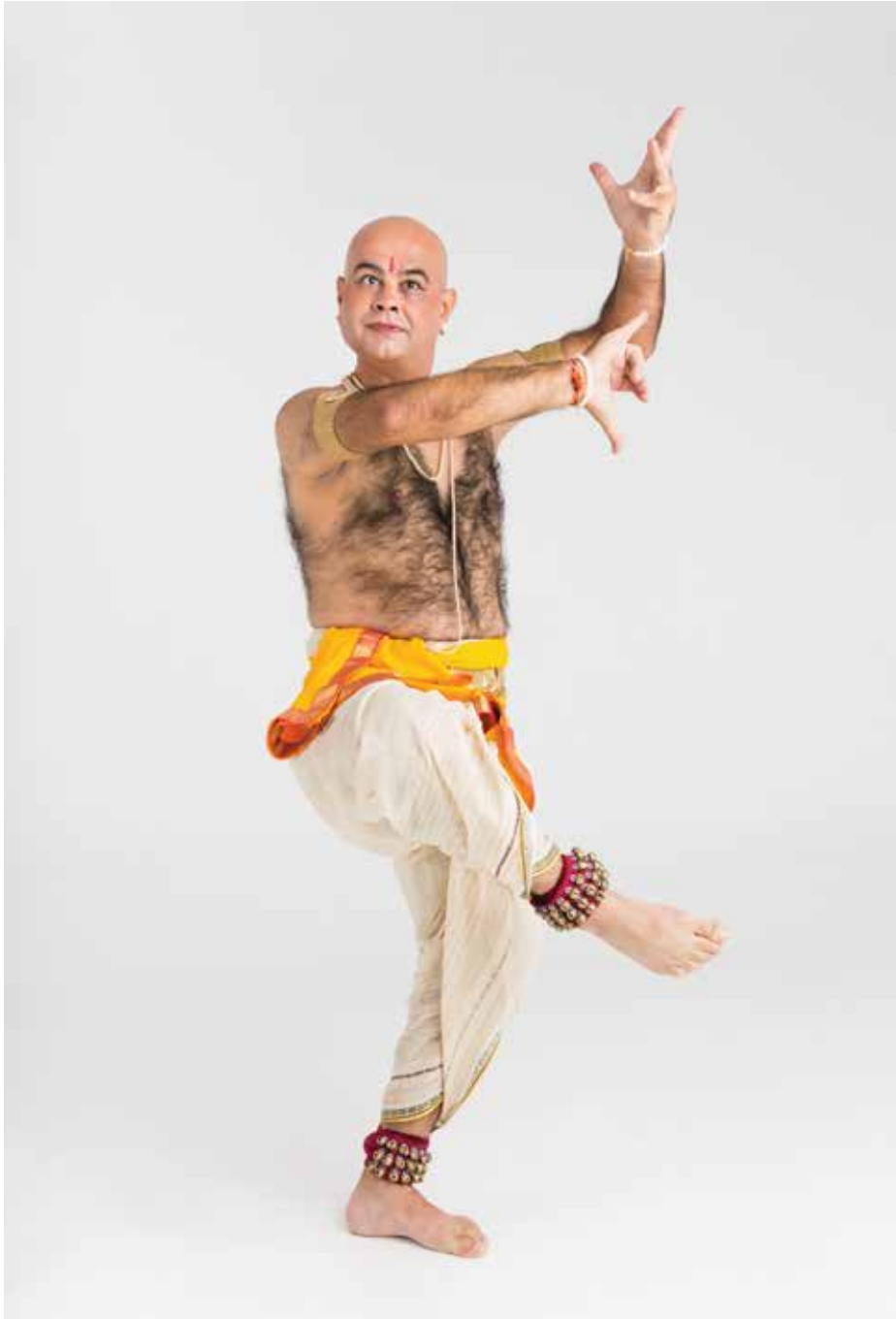


An example of a male Bharatanatyam dancer's jewellery. Traditionally male dancers dance bare chested.



An example of a male Bharatanatyam dancer's sash and traditional jewelled temple belt. The belts are worn by both males and female dancers.





(Far Left) A male Bharatanatyam dancer depicting Lord Shiva holding the Cosmic Drum, or Damaru, which symbolizes creation.

(Centre Left) A male Bharatanatyam dancer depicting the creator Lord Brahma, consort to Mother Saraswati. He is depicted here holding the sacred texts of Vedas in his left hand as indicated through the Chaturo hand gesture. In his right hand he holds sacred mala rosary beads representing time, evidenced through the use of the Hamasyo gesture.

(Left) A male Bharatanatyam dancer depicting Lord Krishna holding the Govardana Mountain in order to shelter the people from devastating floods sent by Lord Indra. The right hand is maintained in the Murgasheshra gesture indicating that Lord Krishna holds an umbrella. The left hand is maintained in the Alapadmukaha signifying a village or high altitudes.





(Far Left) A male Bharatanatyam dancer adorns himself with a necklace using the Katakamukaha hand gesture.

(Centre Left) A male Bharatanatyam dancer adorns himself with earrings using the Katakamukaha hand gesture.

(Left) A male Bharatanatyam dancer depicting one of the Navarasa (emotion) of Veera (pride).

This pictorial text is significant in that it features a male Bharatanatyam dancer, the esteemed Mr. Darshan Purohit, Associate Professor of the Department of Dramatics from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India.

The upper echelons of this ancient and ubiquitous art form is almost completely dominated by female dancers. This is perhaps in due part to the continued existence of centuries-old patriarchal prejudices against males choosing the discipline of dance as a career path, both in India and in other societies internationally.

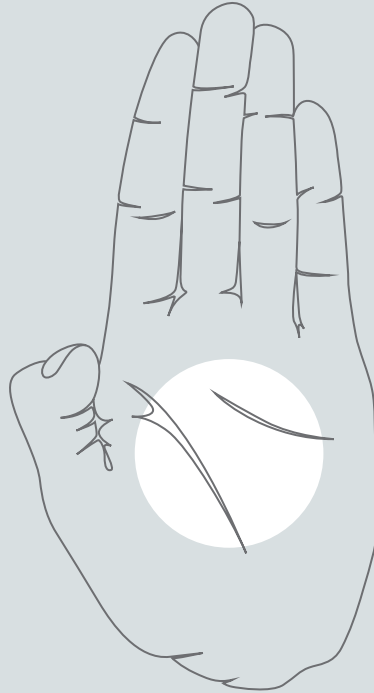
That male Bharatanatyam dancers are in a minority points towards the existing ideas that males, as the perceived dominant gender in society, should not conduct themselves publicly in this manner in terms of their feelings.

As such, sponsorships and patronages, more often than not, are awarded to female dancers over male dancers. Male dancers, particularly unmarried male dancers, in turn face considerable prejudices from society in which the career of dance for males is construed as somehow emasculating.

This trend points towards deeply held prejudices which are deeply linked to homophobia, and outdated ideas of masculinity and femininity.

My thanks to Mr. Darshan Purohit and Ms. Aarti Narotam for their kind participation in this text. Their skill in their chosen physical discipline is matchless and I consider it a great privilege to have been able to photograph them in motion.

They have demonstrated to me that true dance is genderless, in that the gender of the artist ceases to be of importance. Dance is bigger than the dancer.



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Natyakshetram Temple of Dance.

This pictorial features young dancers learning the Art of Bharatanatyam at the Natyakshetram Temple of Dance. This organization is based in the Malabar Community Centre in Harwothia Drive, Malabar, Port Elizabeth.

Under the watchful tutelage of chief instructor Aarti Narotam, these young ladies are schooled in the fundamentals of this thousand year old classical Indian art form.





