

Progressive Growth of Bharatanatyam in Sri Lanka

Anne Nirmala John^{1*}

¹ Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka

*Corresponding Author: nirmalajohn11@gmail.com

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Abstract: *While performing arts that reflect culture are seen to lend identification to countries, they do not seem to remain shackled by them if they prove to be captivating. As they tend to gain popularity and begin to be performed globally, changes are bound to occur in keeping with needs and circumstances. However, are the changes that develop over time and among countries the same between where the art is born and has moved? Whereas the changes that appear elsewhere are sporadic and superficial, those where the art belongs, being naturally integrated with its growth, are necessarily deep-rooted and progressive. Bharatanatyam is the classical performing art genre of Tamil Nadu. Because of its alluring ethos it has gained ascendancy over most other forms and is seen becoming global. Many people the world over are getting interested in learning it and schools have been set up in most countries to provide training. As Bharatanatyam penetrates other countries it cannot be expected to retain its original purity as changes are bound to follow in the wake of the environment and circumstances in which it is performed. Changes are not only inevitable but also justified in Bharatanatyam by Natyasastra, the treatise on which it is based. However, the changes in Bharatanatyam that take shape in other countries cannot be equated to those that occur in the country of its birth. The changes made by Tamil Nadu in Bharatanatyam are regarded as traditions, and hence do not impair its element of 'Suththam'. Such changes are progressive. In this context, the changes made by Sri Lanka are no less progressive because of the genetic relationship of the Sari Lankan Tamils to the people of Tamil Nadu. It being so, Bharatanatyam has become ingrained in the culture of Sri Lanka and is used as representation of the country. Besides Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, none others are bent on promoting the art as their own or bringing about prolific changes for enrichment. This contribution by Sri Lanka is being warmly acknowledged and applauded by the country of its birth.*

Keywords: Alluring ethos, 'Suththam', Traditions, Progressive growth, Genetic relationship

1. Introduction

The progressive growth of Bharatanatyam is a phenomenon that relates logically to Tamil Nadu in India. Bharatanatyam signifies the cultural identity of that State. Cultural identity embodies the collective and cumulative programming of mind and body over time of the people who live as a group, community or nation and is acquired through knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, languages, skills religions and activities. This cultural identity becomes manifested by way of words, gestures, behavior, pictures, objects, rituals and most effectively performing arts

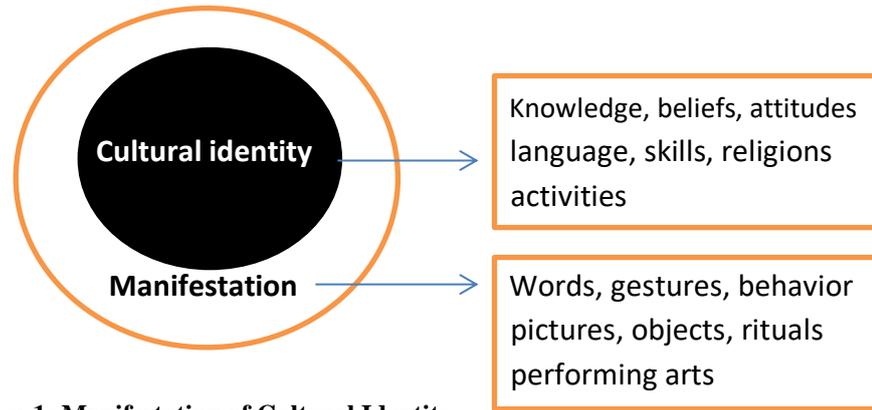


Figure 1: Manifestation of Cultural Identity

India has at least eight such performing arts deemed classical, each generated by a particular region. Classical performing arts are defined as theatrical presentations of solo or group dancing characterized by grace and precision of movement through elaborate footsteps, poses and gestures to musical accompaniment conveying a theme or story.

Countries find pride in displaying their cultural glory through such dances. India has at least eight classical dance forms each of which is related to different states of the country. Each form represents the culture of a particular region or group of people. Kathakali is the theatrical dance of Kerala. Mohini Aattam is its feminine counterpart. Kathak is of North India, Odissi of Orissa, Manipuri of the Northern State of Manipur and Kuchipudi of South India. Bharatanatyam which flourishes in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh originated in Tanjore, and is the oldest and most popular form of dance in India.

2. Alluring ethos of Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam has gained ascendancy over the other forms of dances of India because of its alluring ethos.

2.1 Spirituality

Bharatanatyam is inseparably bound with spirituality. Natyasastra, the ancient treatise on dramaturgy on which Bharatanatyam is based, attributes divine origin to the art as the Fifth Veda of Lord Brahma which was first performed in the court of Lord Indra by the one hundred sons of Bharata with celestial damsels called ‘apsaras’ (Natyasastra, chapter 1 verses 1 to 58).

Later it became the monopoly of the Hindu temples where it was a way of expressing the human longing for union with the Divine. “The roles of the ‘nayaki’ pining for the lord is meant to portray the pining of the ‘jiva’ for the spiritual union with the ‘Paramatma’, and the ‘sakhi; the friend who brings about the union in the dance, in reality, is the Guru who helps the ‘Sandhaka’ reach that state, the state of ultimate universal unification” (Bhavanani, 2001)

The divine nature of Bharatanatyam is emphasized by the ‘shloka’ that is recited by all dancers of the art in the initial part of their training:

*“Angikam bhuvanam yasya vachicam sarva vangmayam
 Aharyam chandra taradi tam vandi satvikam Shivam”*

This ‘sloka’ means ‘we bow to him the benevolent one whose limbs are the world, songs and poetry are the essence of all languages and costume is the moon and the stars’.

2.2 Physical and Mental Development

Associated with divinity is the Yoga aspect of Bharatanatyam both tracing their roots to Sanatana Dharma holding Lord Shiva to be their manifesting principles according to the Saiva Siddhanta traditions. In as much as Yoga, Bharatanatyam develops control of the body enabling the control of mind and energy to become tools of higher awareness (Bhavanani, 2001).

“Doing Bharathanatyam is like doing an aerobic workout and is a good physical as well as mental exercise. It develops focus, coordination, motor skills and helps in easily understanding concepts in math and science” (Rao, Sumana, 2018).

For example, the first cadence of movement one learns in Bharatanatyam, the ‘tatta adavu’, stamping the feet on the ground in an artistic manner while holding the ‘araimandi’ (half sitting position), imparts stability through maintaining the body’s relation with the gravitational pull of the earth . The fast movements of the dance increase the heart rate to cardio levels, and sculpting movements cause muscles to burn fat. Extremely strong thigh muscles grow due to the half-sitting position ‘araimandi’ that is the basis of the entire dance. The upper torso is made small and light to allow for flexibility and the biceps and triceps are healthfully outlined as the dancer holds the hands such that the elbows are in a horizontal line with the shoulders.

The dancer masters the movements of the separate parts of the body like the neck, head, feet, thighs, waist and hands and creates geometric shapes with the limbs through the ‘Karana’.

Performance of the steps in Bharatanatyam which are mathematical calculation of permutations and combinations of rhythmic beats and horizontal, vertical, diagonal and circular movements on stage interlaced with intricate geometrics sharpens memory and mental alertness.

2.3 Communication Potency

Inherent in Bharatanatyam is also an incomparable communication potential. The art is a seamless blend of ‘nritta’ (rhythmic elements), ‘nritya’ (combination of rhythm with body expressions) and ‘natya’ (dramatic elements) producing an effective form of using the whole human body as a language.

A skilled dancer is able to communicate with the eyes and subtle gestures of the face using facial muscles, eyebrows, eyelids and mouth as well as every limb of her body - hands, fingers, waist, legs and feet to convey whatever is intended. The most exquisite communication is achieved in this manner. Sharma (2013 p15) calls it ‘the crescendo of non-verbal communication’

3. Global popularity of Bharatanatyam

Because of these unparalleled attributes possessed by Bharatanatyam it has gained global popularity. It is not only being liked by many the world over, but also schools have been set up in most countries to teach it.

As Bharatanatyam migrates to other countries it cannot be expected to retain its original purity. Changes are bound to follow in the wake of growth. There has always been change inherent in the flow of all creative arts. They are espoused by Natyasastra, the ancient treatise on which Bharatanatyam is based. It states that what has been said in it is not the end of it but only the basement on which one can build mansions of beauty according to time and individual creativity.

The growth of a dance form is necessarily consistent with the changes it undergoes in the course of time and circumstances. Such changes may be either exigent or progressive, or both. Exigent changes are prompted by temporary needs like a change brought about to make the dance satisfy the audience that witness it in the same way as a chameleon changes color to blend with the environment in which it is at that time. However, the changes made by those to whom the art belongs, or who consider it as a treasured possession, are invariably progressive and tend to enrich the art. They are deemed to accumulate as traditions to become one with the art.

In the context of traditions V.P. Dhananjayan (1991) asserts:

There has always been change inherent in the flow of all creative arts, and what is created today as an innovation tends to solidify into traditions tomorrow.

Tradition does not remain static. It is not a stagnant pond. It is an ever flowing, ever renewing river like Ganga. These waters of yesterday were not the waters of today, yet it continues to be the same river changing in contours but changeless in spirit.

He adds:

We have come far from those found in the earliest known treatise on dance, Bharata's *Natyasastra*. We may be able to draw a lineage but not ascribe authenticity to all that is done to all that is enunciated in the text" (ibid).

Niyogi (1994, p. 61) refers to them as:

Changes that are prompted by highly individual and personal urges felt by artistes which drive them to go beyond the prescribed parameters in their chosen field and take directions determined by their personal traits that lead to explore and create or innovate, ultimately leaving a personal imprint on the art for future generations

So were born the four styles in Bharatanatyam called 'Bhaanis'- the Thanjavur, Vazhvoor, Pandanallur and Kalakshetra. Tamil Nadu has an impressive history of great Nattuvanars with legendary fame. Some have carved a niche for themselves in the annals of Bharatanatyam by impressing their personality on the art through the creation of 'Bhaani'. It is an expression of a guru's individuality, his way of exhibiting values through the aspects of the dance. Each style varies by having its own sequence of steps, movements, expressions and presentation. They have come to be mostly named after the district or region in which each was born.

4. Progressive growth

Progressive growth is the process of moving out from the original base towards enriching changes. The major thematic shift from Hinduism there was after the establishment of Kalakshetra in 1936 when Rukmini Devi Arundale introduced Buddhism through the production of 'Syama', one of the three operas composed by Rabindranath Tagore on a story from the early Buddhist literature 'Mahavasthu Avadhan'. V. P. Dhananjayan added Christianity through 'Stree', the story of Mary Magdalene, and also political history through 'Sangamitra', the transformation of Asoka from a war-monger to a peace-lover. Social justice was the theme of 'Ekanta sita' which glorified women's power, and thoughts from the West such as fairy tales found their way into Bharatanatyam. Abstract concepts like balance, lightness, slowness, even eroticism and sexuality, stole the attention of the rebel artiste Chandralekha.

While the language of Bharatanatyam was Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Sanskrit, and the music Carnatic classical, the libretto of Rukmini Devi Arundale's 'Syama' was entirely in Bengali.

M.V. Narasimhachary in ‘Aintinai’ portrayed life in the five provinces Kurunji, Mallai, Neidal, Paalai and Marutham using lyrics from four South Indian languages and Hindi from the North. Mime was the language of V.P. Dhananjayan’s ‘Adventures of Mowgly’, and new-age music an accompaniment in Dr. Sudharani Ragupathy’s ‘Mamudha’.

Rukmini Devi Arundale converted ‘Sathir’ to Bharatanatyam. In doing so, she expurgated it of elements infused by the Devadasi in the course of their decadence and introduced fusion with other dance styles like Kathakali, even the Western Ballet. Kathakali, Kathak, folk dance and mime were fused in ‘Sangamitra’ by V.P. Dhananjayan, martial arts in ‘Mamudha’ by Dr.

Sudharani Ragupathy and artful computer animation with special effects in ‘Navagraha Ula’ by Krishnakumari Narendran to project nine planets of the galaxy.

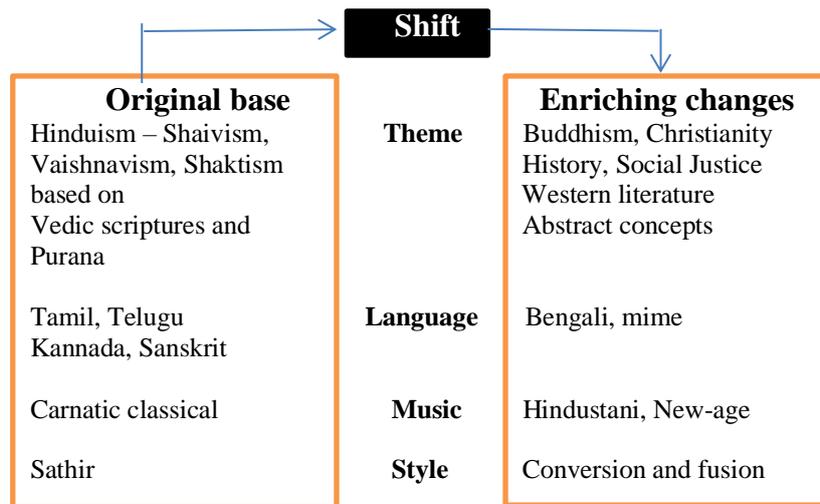


Figure 2: Progressive growth in Tamil Nadu

5. Parallel growth in Sri Lanka

The researcher remembers that when she was a student learning Bharatanatyam in the late 1970’s her ‘gurus’ who were the first Sri Lankan products of Kalakshetra and pioneers of teaching in Sri Lanka were sticklers for purity which they referred to as ‘Suththam’. They spoke of ‘sutha nirutha’ and ‘bhava’. They would never ever experiment with Bharatanatyam. Their behavior patterns and dressing were all conventional. They proudly spoke of traditions, on how a dancer should walk, talk, sit, listen, obey, follow rules, and all about their ‘gurus’ and their behavior. They were always traditionally dressed whenever they came in to take the class. I remember seeing one of them, although old, whenever entering the dance classroom dressed in an ankle level short saree and pajama with a long plait and a ‘bindi’ in black. Those were teachers who doggedly believed that the slightest shift from what was taught to them by their predecessors was sacrilegious.

However, research brings to light that the growth of Bharatanatyam in both countries has been parallel. The growth of Bharatanatyam in Sri Lanka has been identical and has even excelled that of Tamil Nadu. Productions on Christian¹ themes have surpassed Tamil Nadu by leaps and bounds, one of which ‘Theva Katpanaikal’ (the commandments of God), first telecast in 1985, was repeatedly presented both on T.V and stage. It is note-worthy that both countries were privileged to have renowned priests, Rev. Msgr. S.M. George in India and Rev. Fr. N.M. Saviri in Sri Lanka who pursued their evangelical mission through Bharatanatyam. ‘Mathikor Allaipu (call to wisdom) presented to mark the International Women’s Day, promoted social justice²

based on feminism. Western themes³ like ‘Vidiyaatha Iravondru’, ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’ have gone on the stage. No less, Sri Lankan thoughts and values⁴ have surfaced in such productions as ‘Narthana Bandham’. ‘Sakunthala’, the Indian epic, was produced in the Sinhala language⁵ and ‘One day at a time’, an English hymnal, was performed with the English lyric⁶. Many songs in Sinhala with Sinhalese light music sung by prominent artistes W.D. Ameradeva, P.V. Nandasiri, Sujatha Athanayake were focused in Bharatanatyam. At the same time, prolific efforts have been made to harmonize Bharatanatyam with Kandyan Dance⁷ through memorable productions. In ‘Kalayil Uyirkkum Manitham’, ‘Vadamody Koothu’, a folk dance⁸ of Sri Lanka, was blended in the production.

1. ‘Katpanaiketaatha Kaalamathil’ (1984) the temptation of Eve, ‘Theva Katpanaikal’ (1985), commandments of God, ‘Tholuvam Sollum Kathai’ (1987), story told by the crib, ‘Chellum Tharaiyil Villunthavai’ (1988), parable of the sower, ‘Naddakkindrome’ (1989) impermanence of life, ‘Thaimeyin Thaapam’ (1991), trauma of Virgin Mary, ‘Paalan Piranthaar’ (1994), birth of Christ, ‘Vetri Koddi’ (1996) agony and resurrection, presentations of Nirmalanjali, Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Coming of the Messiah’ (1962), Kalai Kovil of Leelambigai Selvarajah.
2. ‘Mathikor Allaippu’ (1994) women’s dignity, Narmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Vimoshanam’ (1995) the 30 years’ war, lyrics by Veeramani Iyer produced by Shanthini Sivanesan,
3. ‘Vidiyatha Iravondru’ (2001), Dr.Faustus, Nirmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Enchanted’ (2017) tales of Disney princesses, Jeeva Ratnarajah, ‘Kaanakaththin Madiyil’ (1991), Hansel and Gretel, Nirmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Venpanniyaalum Elu Kullarkalum’ (2019) Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Nirmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam
4. ‘Narthana Bandham’ (2016) explores relationship between Bharatanatyam and Kandyan Dance, Aru Sri Art Theatre, ‘Pasaththin Poer’ (2003) reviews Ravana of Ramayanam, Narmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Rhythms of Shiva’ (2017) explores the manifestation of Lord Shiva through the vibrations ‘Om’, Aru Sri Art Theatre. Vala Naadu’ (1992) projects the fertility of Sri Lanka, Nirmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Vipulanantha Adigal’ (1974), Vipulananthar Day Celebration of Jaffna University, lyrics by Yalpanam N. Weramani Iyer whose songs on many shrines of Jaffna have become Pathams in Bharatanatyam, produced by Shanthini Sivanesan
5. ‘Sakunthala’ (2009) Sinhala lyric, Aru Sri Art Theatre, ‘Marambari’ (2021) Sinhala lyric and music, Nirmalanjali Academy of Bharatanatyam, ‘Rhythm’ (2016), Kandyan drum interwoven with Bharatanatyam Miridangam, ‘Kavi Maalaa’ (2017), blending of lyrics with Tamil breaking language barriers, Aru Sri Art Theatre
6. ‘One Day at a Time’ (2015), English lyrics, Swami Premananda International Conference,
7. ‘Ramayanam’ (2008) Kandyan Dance used for Ravana’s court, Aru Sri Art Theatre
8. ‘Kalayil Uyirkkum Manitham’ (1990), fusion of Vadamodi Koothu style, produced by Shanthini Sivanesan for the Jaffna University

6. Exploring new dimensions

It is evidenced that Sri Lanka walks behind Tamil Nadu in every direction towards the progressive growth of Bharatanatyam. However, there has occurred one instance when Sri Lanka outdistanced Tamil Nadu. ‘Vidiyaatha Iravondru’ (a night without dawn) produced by Sri Lanka in 2001 was emulated by Tamil Nadu in 2007 with the presentation of ‘Masquerade’ that fell no short of appreciation.

‘Vidiyaatha Iravondru’ is an enactment of the Elizabethan poet Christopher Marlowe’s ‘Doctor Faustus’, a classical composition in English embodying the tragic story of an utmost scholar who after selling his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years of ultimate power laments bitterly at the final hour before his damnation

‘O, lente, lente, currite noctis equi’

(Oh, slowly, slowly run, horses of the night) – desperate appeal to the horses pulling the chariot of time to go slow before reaching midnight, the time the devil will come to claim his soul.



Figure 3: ‘Vidiyaatha Iravondru’ (2001), production of Nirmalanjali, Colombo, Sri Lanka

The production was a tradition-bending endeavor requiring blending of dance style, music, costumes, choreography and whatnot, equal to ‘Masquerade’ which was based on Alexander Duma’s ‘The man in the Iron Mask’. It was also a giant leap about which Ramaratnam (2015) wishfully wrote, “One hopes this becomes the new tradition of the institution as also the encouragement of new creative work”

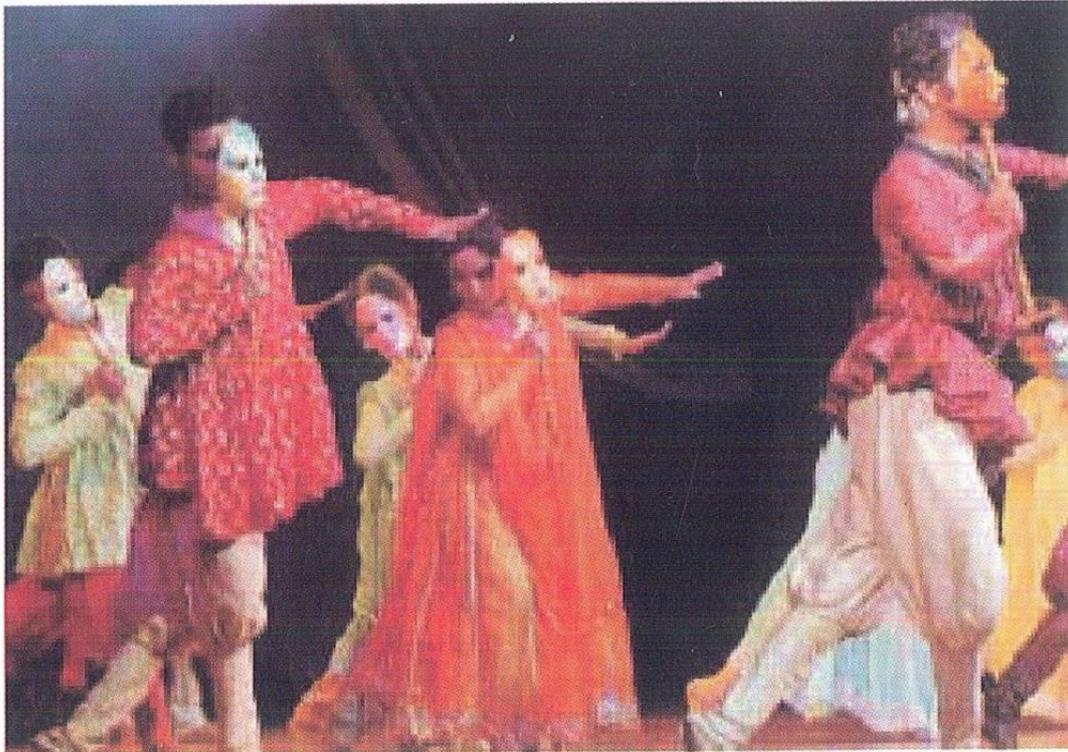


Figure 4: Masquerade (2007), production of Kalakshetra, Tamil Nadu, India

7. Sri Lanka's claim to Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is sacred to Sri Lanka as much as it is to Tamil Nadu, much more than to other countries.

The known fact is that when a Sri Lankan Tamil visits Tamil Nadu he tends to be taken as belonging to that country until he begins to talk. Then will he be asked, "Aren't you Sri Lanka?" although he speaks the same language. This shows the existence of the genetic sameness in appearance.

Topographical traces loom bearing out that Sri Lanka has been once connected to India by land. The border between Sri Lanka and India, said to be the shortest sea borders of the world, is a chain of limestone shoals between Pamban Island known as Rameswaram Island and the islands of Mannar. It is known as Adam's Bridge, also called Rama's Bridge, which is 50 kilometers long. Some of the sandbanks are dry, and the sea in the area is very shallow being only one to ten meters deep in places thus hindering navigation. It was reportedly passable on foot up to the 15th century until storms deepened the channel.

Proximity, long association, constant flow of people between the countries, periodic invasions and intermarriages may have been the cause for cultural link, if not heritage. However, the fact is generally the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the people of Tamil Nadu speak the same language and follow the same religion.

Most importantly, Sri Lanka is seen to stake a claim to Bharatanatyam with great aplomb. The government has recognized it as a national art of the country and as representing the Tamils of Sri Lanka. It is proudly performed at not only internal prestigious events but also momentous

international celebrations. State approved institutions like the Ramanathan University of Fine Arts in Jaffna, North Ceylon Music Academy and the Vipulananthar College of Music and dance in Batticaloa have come into existence. The dance is recognized as a subject of study leading to university degrees. As a result the number learning Bharatanatyam in the country has increased. Even the Sinhalese are seen interested in obtaining proficiency in it. Some who have gained professional status in teaching the art have set up schools in foreign countries such as England, America, Canada, Australia, France, Germany Malaysia, Switzerland and Singapore.

8. Conclusion

To the Tamils of Sri Lanka, Bharatanatyam has singular significance because it serves to fill a void that exists – the absence of a classical dance genre to fulfill their needs.

Some say that Bharatanatyam will always be an Indian classical dance:

To put it bluntly, we are using an Indian art form as a representation of our cultural identity. While Sadir evolved into Bharatanatyam in India, a similar occurrence did not arise in Sri Lanka. Unless Bharatanatyam metamorphoses in Sri Lanka it will always remain an Indian classical dance form regardless of the fact that it is practiced by thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils across the world (Kulanthai, 2018)

Others say that Bharatanatyam belongs to the Sri Lankan Tamils also as it is a dance form of all Tamils wherever they are:

No one has ever suggested that the expatriate Tamils have to develop a dance of their own. Such suggestion is preposterous. Bharatanatyam though regarded as one of the classical and national dance forms of India yet it does not distract from the view that it is essentially a Tamil classical dance form (Pathmanathan, 2004).

However, Bharatanatyam is in the hearts of the Tamils of the country not as a mere showcase of their skills or for career pursuit, but as a platform to develop and display thoughts, values and culture. It is such to the Sri Lankan Tamils more than to others that its growth in Sri Lanka is eminently progressive and by Sri Lanka warmly appreciated even by the creator of the art, Tamil Nadu:

I give great credit of popularizing Bharatanatyam around the globe to the Sri Lankan teachers and dancers. Wherever you go, if there is a big institution for Bharatanatyam training, definitely it belongs to a Sri Lankan Tamil. Their contribution towards the development of the art goes hand in hand with ours (Surajit, 2020).

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