Bharata Natyam in the US Diaspora: Staging Indian American Identity through Performance at Classical Indian Dance Festivals, Competitions, and Online Platforms

Dissertation

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Abstract

Bharata Natyam in the US Diaspora: Staging Indian American Identity through Performance at Classical Indian Dance Festivals, Competition, and Online Platforms examines how second-generation Indian Americans develop, advance and make Bharata Natyam visible and relevant through concert stages, festivals, competitions, and online platforms in the United States and India. The term "second-generation" refers to the children of immigrants who were born in the United States or who arrived here before the age of seven or eight. I argue that second-generation Indian American practitioners make Bharata Natyam a relevant practice in the US for audiences in the South Asian diaspora by transforming Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, tradition, and nationalism through practices manifesting cultural hybridity. These second-generation artists rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media to reflect their experiences of growing up in the US. There are two aspects to the way I analyze what it means to make Bharata Natyam a "relevant" practice. On the one hand, this term comes from the practitioners I interviewed: when they say that they want Bharata Natyam to be a relevant practice, they mean they want it to be recognized as an important American mainstream dance form, with increased performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam practitioners to showcase their work. Additionally, "relevant" relates to maintaining legibility for the intrinsic values of the practice even—and especially—when practitioners expand the boundaries of the form. Thus, the stakes of Bharata Natyam being a relevant practice in the United States for its practitioners and audience members

leads to more classical Indian dance representation on American concert stages. In reworking Bharata Natyam to reflect their political, social, cultural context in the US, second-generation practitioners challenge who holds power and has privilege in the global Bharata Natyam community.

Through archival, ethnographic, and choreographic analysis, I examine how second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners navigate their dual identities and stay connected to their cultural heritage by negotiating issues of representation, assimilation, and acculturation. Understanding how second-generation practitioners choreograph and perform their positionalities is important for articulating the complexities of their Indian-American diasporic identities and their commitment to making Bharata Natyam relevant in the United States specifically. I also explore the ways in which second-generation practitioners of Bharata Natyam utilize classical Indian dance festivals, competitions, and online platforms to showcase their pursuits as professional artists. This dissertation contributes to the existing scholarship on Bharata Natyam in the diaspora by demonstrating the importance second-generation Bharata Natyam dancers see in transforming and increasing the visibility of classical Indian dance to reflect their hybrid positionalities in the US.

Dedication

In loving memory of my father, Dr. Lalit Narasimha Acharya (1951-2022).

I would have never progressed to this moment in my PhD journey without your encouragement, support, and love. You will always inspire me to follow my dreams.

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Dance Studies

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Introduction

In an article published November 24, 1996 in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Going Completely Nuts: Forget Traditional 'Nutcrackers:' Coming Soon: A 1960s Suburbia Modernization and Versions using African American and Hindu Lore," dance critic Lewis Segal writes about three *Nutcracker* productions in California. These productions ground the traditional story of a Christmas dream in the multicultural realities of modern America. One of the versions he writes about is Viji Prakash's "Hindu-ized" *Nutcracker*, which "retells the familiar story in a different movement language: Bharata Natyam, an ancient classical dance idiom of India" (Segal 1996, 8). Segal interviews Prakash and asserts that she is a "dancer, choreographer and teacher who has built a large following in Southern California with traditional and experimental Bharata Natyam productions" and in staging the *Nutcracker*, is after "something more complex than merely transferring 'The Nutcracker' to South Asia" (1996). In Prakash's own words, "I think 'The Nutcracker' is a universal story…I have strongly identified parts of my production with America, so it is most relevant for those of us who live and grow up here" (qtd. in Segal 1996). Segal states that Prakash's version reflects the overlapping cultural identities and possible fantasies of a child raised in Southern California of parents from India (1996).

I begin with this article about Prakash's *Nutcracker* production because I participated in this version as a young Bharata Natyam student. I began my Bharata Natyam training with Prakash in Southern California only a few years prior to the staging of this production. For me, learning

Bharata Natyam was the key connection to situating my belonging in the South Asian diaspora in Los Angeles. My Bharata Natyam lessons with Prakash reinforced an upper-caste, Hindu connection to India through the structure of my classes from starting with the Hindu prayers we recited at the beginning of class to the *namaskaram* (salutation) that concluded class. These lessons also reinforced the fact that we were studying Bharata Natyam in America: once our classes were over, we sprinted out the door so we could get sandwiches and fries at the fast food chain conveniently located across the parking lot. Indian culture and Hindu religious values informed my Bharata Natyam training, as did the inordinate amount of time spent at various fast food chains close to the studio, discussing the latest episodes of *Friends*, and other aspects that shaped our "American" identity. I, along with my second-generation Indian American classmates, navigated our overlapping cultural identities inside and outside of our Bharata Natyam lessons. Dancing in productions like *The Nutcracker* and *Cinderella* (a production that premiered a few years after *The Nutcracker* that also used Bharata Natyam movement to convey a story familiar to American audiences) provided another space for us to negotiate our overlapping cultural identities. As I read Segal's article in 2022, I realize my question around examining the relevance of Bharata Natyam in the US that shapes this dissertation began with my Bharata Natyam lessons in Southern California and participation in productions like *The Nutcracker*. My teacher's initiative to make Bharata Natyam relevant to her students through her teaching and choreography establishes the foundation of my dissertation research.

I have thought about the relevance of Bharata Natyam in the US for many years through my experiences studying and practicing Bharata Natyam in Los Angeles, Honolulu, New York City, Columbus, and Chennai, India. These experiences inform the basis for examining the ways in which Bharata Natyam becomes a site of cultural negotiation as practitioners circulate,

transmit, and transform it in the South Asian diaspora. A key experience that sparked my interested in examining US-based classical Indian dance festivals was attending the Chennai Music and Dance Season in 2009. The Chennai Music and Dance Season is the largest international classical Indian dance and music festival. It occurs annually for the entire month of December. I moved to Chennai in 2008 for further training in Bharata Natyam and to broaden my understanding of the form's cultural context in India. At the time I attended, I was struck by the conversations and debates about tradition, authenticity, religion, and caste around the work presented at the Chennai Music and Dance Festival. I learned a lot about local Indian practitioners' frustrations over growing mediocrity and deviations from the "traditional" format in the Bharata Natyam field.

These conversations and observations from the 2009 Chennai Music and Dance Season stuck with me when I returned to the US to pursue an MFA in Dance at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa). My research as a graduate student was rooted in questions of authenticity and tradition (questions that came about while attending the Chennai and Music Dance Season). These questions became more pressing as I gained more opportunities to teach, perform, and choreograph in Hawai‘i. When I first started teaching and choreographing, I was afraid that I didn't know "enough" about Bharata Natyam to change and adapt the practice in the context I was working in. I hesitated to transform Bharata Natyam because I didn't want to deviate from what I understood to be the "traditional" format of the practice that had been passed on to me by my teachers in the US and India. I was afraid that my Bharata Natyam practice would not be "authentic" or "traditional" (and that it would misrepresent or mischaracterize Bharata Natyam). However, I realized that through my own translations of Bharata Natyam's content, I was transforming the practice. Through this realization, I became more comfortable

establishing Bharata Natyam through my overlapping cultural identities and not in relation to something people around me insisted was authentic and traditional. My positionality became a lens for me to raise questions challenging Bharata Natyam's authenticity and tradition. These questions focused on the ways in which location informs and impacts Bharata Natyam as it becomes a site for the negotiation of cultural identity, provide the basis for analyzing US-based classical Indian festivals, competitions, and online platforms.

As I navigated the cultural hybridity of my caste-privileged Hindu, Indian-American positionality through my developing embodied Bharata Natyam knowledge, I became interested in examining US-based classical Indian dance festivals and competitions. These festivals and competitions were on my radar because of my interest in the questions that came up for me from attending the Chennai Music and Dance Season. I started to wonder about the significance of these festivals for classical Indian dance practitioners and the impact of these festivals in transmitting and transforming Bharata Natyam in the US. In 2019, I came across a video promoting the 2019 Drive East Festival on the YouTube channel ITV Gold. In the video, co-founder Sahasra Sambamoorthi emphasizes that the Drive East Festival is "a place to understand the relevance of Indian classical arts in the American context." Sambamoorthi's statement about understanding the relevance of classical Indian dance in the American context is echoed by other second-generation Indian American practitioners of Bharata Natyam as they establish companies and perform regularly at Indian classical dance festivals. For example, the members of Prakriti Dance, a company based in Washington D.C., state on their website that they take the "ancient movement vocabulary of Bharata Natyam [to] interpret modern day themes bringing relevance and context to the ever evolving Indian art" (Prakriti Dance, n.d.). Other companies that perform at US-based festivals like Jiva Dance, Nava Dance Theatre, Eyakkam Dance Company signal

their commitment to growing Bharata Natyam through the incorporation of modern or contemporary themes or media that are influenced by their cultural hybridity. This commitment helps build appreciation of and accessibility to Bharata Natyam in the US by making the practice relevant to the present (Jiva Dance, n.d., Nava Dance Theatre, n.d., Eyakkam Dance Company, n.d.).

This dissertation analyzes the work of these companies and festival organizers. I examine how concert stages, festivals, competitions, and online platforms in the United States and India provide opportunities for second-generation Indian Americans to develop, advance and make Bharata Natyam visible in the US. The term "second-generation" refers to the children of immigrants who were born in the United States or who arrived here before the age of seven or eight (Maira 2002, 17). I argue that second-generation Indian American practitioners make Bharata Natyam a relevant practice in the US for audiences in the South Asian diaspora by transforming Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, caste, tradition, and nationalism through practices manifesting cultural hybridity. These second-generation artists rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media to reflect their experiences of growing up in the US. There are two aspects to the way I analyze what it means to make Bharata Natyam a "relevant" practice. On the one hand, this term comes from the practitioners I interviewed: when they say that they want Bharata Natyam to be a relevant practice, they mean they want it to be recognized as an important American mainstream dance form, with increased performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam practitioners to showcase their work. Additionally, "relevant" relates to maintaining legibility for the intrinsic values of the practice even—and especially—when practitioners expand the boundaries of the form. Thus, the stakes of Bharata Natyam being a relevant practice in the

United States for its practitioners and audience members leads to more classical Indian dance representation on American concert stages. In reworking Bharata Natyam to reflect their political, social, cultural context in the US, second-generation practitioners challenge who holds power and has privilege in the global Bharata Natyam community.

My research examines how second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners navigate their dual identities and stay connected to their cultural heritage by negotiating issues of representation, assimilation, and acculturation. Understanding how second-generation practitioners choreograph and perform their positionalities is important for articulating the complexities of their Indian-American diasporic identities and their commitment to making Bharata Natyam relevant in the United States specifically. I also explore the ways in which second-generation practitioners of Bharata Natyam utilize classical Indian dance festivals, competitions, and online platforms to showcase their pursuits as professional artists.

This dissertation also analyzes the relationship that second-generation Indian American practitioners have to India as I have observed them in the context of the Chennai Music and Dance Season (also known as the Madras[1] Music and Dance Season) in Chennai, India. The conversations that start in Chennai around defining, preserving, and interrogating notions of classical and contemporary Bharata Natyam performance are important for analyzing how second-generation practitioners shift Chennai-based definitions of classical and contemporary Bharata Natyam in making the form visible and accessible in the US.

To examine the growth of classical Indian dance practices in the United States, I situate this study historically by first investigating the concert stage and the work of dance artists Roshanara, Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, Bissano Ram Gopal, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Indrani

[1] Madras was the former name of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India under British colonial rule.

Rahman, and Shanta Rao, Indian and white dancers who were performing Indian dance forms and touring in the US beginning in the early 20th century. Through archival research, I trace the emergence of Indian dance forms on American concert stages to analyze the changing attitudes towards Indian dance both in India and the US. These practitioners negotiated Orientalist perceptions of their identities and practices and their work sparked debates between dance critics in India and the US around the genre of classical Indian dance. The reviews of their work are important for understanding how American critics were teaching their audiences to view and understand first Hindu dance and later the Indian classical styles of Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Kathak, Mohini Attam, and Manipuri. I connect American dance critics' reviews of 20th century artists' tours to present-day American dance critics' reviews on classical Indian dance performances at US-based classical Indian dance festivals. The ways that American dance critics familiarized audiences with classical Indian dance in the 20th century—through Orientalist notions of India as spiritual and exotic—provides context for understanding how second-generation practitioners navigate their dual identities in reworking Bharata Natyam for American concert stages in contemporary contexts. I also situate this study historically by examining the impact that the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 had on the development of Indian dance in the US. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 was a United States federal law that prevented immigration from Asian countries (and set quotas on the number of immigrants from other countries). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished immigration quotas based on national origin that led to an increase of migrants from South Asia. As I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2, these two immigration laws historically ground my examination of how Indian American practitioners negotiate issues of representation, multiculturalism,

assimilation, and acculturation in classical Indian dance festivals, competitions, and online platforms because of their impact on the presence of South Asians in the US.

This project analyzes US-based online festivals and competitions including: the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival in Cleveland, OH; the Drive East Festivals in New York City, NY, San Francisco, CA, and Plano, TX; the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance Festival in New York City, NY; Buckeye Mela Fusion and Bhangra Competition in Columbus, OH; Navatman online competition; and the Chennai Music and Dance Season in Tamil Nadu, India. I also examine the following online organizations and platforms: IndianRaga, Facebook, and TikTok. The emergence of classical Indian dance festivals and competitions in the United States began with the Thyagaraja Aradhana festival. Established in 1978, it is considered to be the largest Indian music and dance festival outside of India, taking place over twelve days and featuring music and dance artists from India, the UK, and the US. The Chennai Music and Dance Season has also had an impact on the emergence of the Drive East Festival, which began in New York City in 2013, expanded to San Francisco in 2018, and Plano, Texas in 2020. The festival considers itself a "mini season" that spans over a period of a week, featuring over forty programs (performances and workshops). In 2016, an online collective called IndianRaga started an online competition where winners are featured on the group's Facebook page. I examine the significance of these spaces for the Indian diasporic community by analyzing how these festivals are organized and how festival organizers along with second-generation participants rework the boundaries of classical Bharata Natyam. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these festivals were postponed, moved online, or canceled. This dissertation thus examines the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on these platforms and the ways second-generation practitioners

navigated and negotiated the relevance and accessibility of Bharata Natyam in the US during the pandemic.

Bharata Natyam Practice in India and the Indian Diaspora

In order to analyze the ways second-generation Indian American practitioners rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media to reflect their experiences of growing up in the US, in this section I explain Bharata Natyam aesthetics and the significance of Bharata Natyam in India and the Indian diaspora in the US. One of eight classical dance forms, Bharata Natyam is characterized by its grounded, symmetrical, and linear movements. There are three key positions that are foundational to Bharata Natyam technique. The first is *samapadam*, a standing position in which the dancers bring both feet together (so that their inner edges touch), place the backs of their hands on their waist, and lean slightly forward. The second defining position is the *aramandi* or half-seated position, in which Bharata Natyam dancers bring their weight down, feet and knees turned out, with the weight evenly distributed between their feet. The third basic position is the *muramandi*, a full-seated position in which dancers bring their weight fully to the ground as they sit on their heels, knees turned out. The combination of *mudras* (hand gestures), leg positions (*sthanakam*), standing postures (*mandalam*), and walking movements (*chari*) form *advaus*, defined as "basic steps" or "units of movement." *Adavus* placed together form *jatis* or movement sequences. There are three components to Bharata Natyam technique: *nritta* (pure or abstract movement), *nritya* (movement that conveys a narrative), and *natya* meaning drama (the combination of *nritta* and *nritya*). *Nritya* is conveyed through a dancer's *abhinaya* (the art of expression) and *bhava* (feeling).

A key defining aesthetic principle in the classical Indian arts is *rasa*. Translated as "juice or flavor," the *Natya Sastra*[2] defines *rasa* as the emotions an audience experiences when watching a dancer's *abhinaya* or *bhava*. The *navarasas* (*nava* meaning nine) are: *shringara* (love), *hasya* (joy), *adbhutha* (wonder), *veera* (courage), *raudra* (anger), *bhayanaka* (fear), *bibhatsa* (disgust), *karuna* (compassion), and *shanta* (peace) (Sarkar 2022, 65). The terms *navarasas*, *nritta, nritya, natya, abhinaya,* and *bhava*, along with the terms that describe Bharata Natyam postures and movements are important for understanding the ways second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam techniques and compositions. In making Bharata Natyam a relevant practice from within their own generational, political, social, and cultural context in the US, second-generation practitioners transform *nritta* and *nritya* by re- arranging *adavus* and/or using *abhinaya* to address anti-Black racism, for example, in the South Asian community. Second-generation practitioners further transform *nritta*, *nritya*, and *natya* through the use of video editing, re-mixed music compositions, and memes. I examine more aspects of Bharata Natyam technique in the following chapters to further analyze the changes second-generation Indian American practitioners make to Bharata Natyam technique for articulating the complexities of their Indian-American diasporic identities in the US.

South Asian dance scholarship regarding Bharata Natyam in India and the Indian diaspora provides context for examining how second-generation Indian American practitioners transform Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, caste, tradition, and nationalism to

[2] The *Natya Sastra* is an ancient Indian treatise on dramaturgy that is considered to be foundational to all classical Indian dances. It is believed to have been composed by the sage Bharata Muni approximately 2,500 years ago. The *Natya Sastra* consists of 36 chapters and 6,000 verses covering a range of subjects from drama composition, structure and staging to performance genres, costumes and make-up, among other things. Dance is addressed only in the fourth chapter. This chapter, "Tandava Lakshana" describes the *karanas*, 108 movements that include specific leg, hip, body, and arm movements.

make Bharata Natyam a relevant practice in the US. South Asian dance scholars' analyses on Bharata Natyam's history challenge narratives that assert Bharata Natyam as a representation of an uninterrupted tradition, narratives that emerged when *sadir* was transformed into present-day Bharata Natyam. *Sadir* was a solo form practiced by temple dancers, known as *devadasis*, in the temples and courts of South India. *Devadasis*' livelihoods were situated within South Indian temples and courts through their being wedded to Hindu deities and the patronage they received from the courts (Meduri 1986, 2). Prior to the seventeenth century, *devadasis* were respected for being well-versed in Hindu philosophy, music, literature, and dance. Between the period of British colonization of India between 1750 and 1947, colonial policies morally opposed the practice of *devadasis* that led to the decline of their status. In concert with British colonial policies that saw the practice of *devadasis* as immoral through their received patronage from South Indian kings, the push to abolish *sadir* was supported by Indian "reformers" in the 1890s as part of the nationalist movement for India's independence from the British (Meduri 1986, 12; O'Shea 2007, 13). The combination of British colonial policies and anti-colonial sentiment within India's national movement culminated in the name *sadir* being changed to Bharata Natyam in 1932. Individuals from upper-middle class and caste backgrounds conducted this process of renaming *sadir* to revive Indian arts as "traditional" and "ancient" to counter British colonialism (which had suppressed these practices). To reinvent Bharata Natyam as an ancient and traditional practice, revivalists like E. Krishna Iyer, an upper caste lawyer and dancer, and Rukmini Devi Arundale, an upper caste dancer who established Kalakshetra in 1936,[3] directly connected Bharata Natyam to the *Natya Sastra*. Through this process, upper caste practitioners

[3] Kalakshetra is an arts and cultural academy founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936. Kalakshetra is located in Chennai, India.

of the newly recognized Bharata Natyam appropriated hereditary dancers' practices and in doing so, marginalized and erased hereditary dancers from the histories of this style (Purkayastha 2014, 8). The legacy of colonial reform and nationalist social movements that reconfigured Bharata Natyam in the 1930s implicates present-day Bharata Natyam dancers who reinforce discourses of tradition set forth by revival-era practitioners (O'Shea 2007, 13). Further, Bharata Natyam dancers who negotiate and recontextualize global influences to authenticate Bharata Natyam as a traditional Indian dance form justify the politics of revival and the reclamation of a "temple history" for modern Bharata Natyam practice that continues to marginalize and erase hereditary dancers from this form (Soneji 2011, 25). South Asian dance scholarship that interrogates and challenges Bharata Natyam's history as an ancient and traditional practice provides context for my analysis on second-generation practitioners' desire to transform notions of tradition embedded in Bharata Natyam as they develop, advance and make Bharata Natyam relevant in the US.

South Asian dance scholars further examine Bharata Natyam in the diaspora as an invented tradition[4] through which second-generation Indian Americans learn to maintain links to Indian culture. Dance theorist Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* analyzes classical Indian dance's utility in producing cultural nationalism and "model minority" citizenship among first and second-generation practitioners in the Indian diaspora in Australia and the US. I build on Srinivasan's analysis of the Indian dancing body at the intersection of labor, race, gender, immigration, and citizenship to examine how classical Indian

[4] Invented tradition is a concept introduced by Eric Hobsbawm. Invented traditions are cultural practices that are presented or perceived as traditional, arising from the people starting in the distant past, but which in fact are relatively recent and often even consciously invented by identifiable historical actors (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 5).

dance festivals, competitions, and online platforms provide opportunities for second-generation practitioners to explore these intersections through their reworking of Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes. Srinivasan's study on second-generation Indian American practitioners focuses on their training through the completion of their *arangetram*. An *arangetram* is a solo debut that takes place at the end of one's Bharata Natyam training. Second-generation practitioners typically perform their *arangetram* in their mid to late teenage years (usually before a dancer begins college). As Srinivasan and other South Asian dance scholars who look at Bharata Natyam in the diaspora assert, second-generation Bharata Natyam students often stop practicing and performing publicly after their *arangetram* (Srinivasan 2011, 90; Katrak 2011, 35). My research examines second-generation Indian American practitioners pursuing Bharata Natyam performance opportunities beyond their *arangetram* at US-based classical Indian dance festivals (Chapter Two), classical and intercollegiate Indian dance competitions, and social media (Chapter Three). In examining second-generation practitioners' interest in performing beyond their *arangetram*, I challenge narratives that tie second-generation Indian Americans' interest in learning Bharata Natyam to their parents' desire to maintain links to Indian culture. Challenging these narratives are important to examining the ways second-generation practitioners establish their own relationship to the practice and their identity in the US.

To challenge the assumption that second-generation dancers pursue Bharata Natyam to stay connected to their parents' "home" culture, I examine the relationship between "home" and "homeland" for first and second-generation Indian Americans through their views on developing and making Bharata Natyam visible through US-based classical Indian dance festivals, competitions, and online platforms. South Asian scholar Sunaina Maira's study on the ways

second-generation youth negotiate the collective nostalgia for India (re)created by their parents and their peers through their practice of re-mixed bhangra, a folk form from Punjab, India, provides further insight on the stakes for second-generation Indian Americans to develop dance practices that reflect their cultural hybridity. I pursue her argument that Indian American youth enjoy bhangra remix because of its hybrid sensibility and that "this subculture helps produce a notion of what it means to be cool for a young person in New York, that is reworked into the nostalgia for India yet not seamless with it" (Maira 2000, 8) in my analysis of classical and intercollegiate Indian fusion dance competitions in Chapter Three. Second-generation practitioners negotiate their parents' nostalgia for the "homeland" and certain ideologies of Indianness through choreography set to remixed music in the context of these competitions (Maira 2002, 10). Dance scholar Angela Ahlgren's study on Japanese American attitudes towards establishing Taiko drumming in North America provides context for my own analysis on the differing attitudes towards developing and advancing Bharata Natyam between first and second-generation communities in the US. In examining the tensions between first and second-generation communities in the US, Ahlgren complicates and challenges notions of Asian American identity as fixed or static, that is continually being made and remade through policy, immigration, activism, and performance (2018, 14). I build on Ahlgren's research to contest the notion that second-generation practitioners look towards an imagined homeland nostalgically in their reworking of Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes to reflect their positionalities of living in the US. The practitioners I examine establish themselves in the US through Bharata Natyam as opposed to nostalgia for an imagined homeland.

In order to examine how second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes, it is also important to interrogate caste in the ways they

establish their own relationship to the practice and their identity in the US. Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* provides a framework for critically analyzing the politics of revival and the reclamation of a "temple history" for modern Bharata Natyam dance by its middle-class, upper caste practitioners. Soneji's analysis on the appropriation of hereditary dance practices by dominant-caste elites highlights the continued caste exclusion that is evident in the notable absence of Bharata Natyam dancers from caste-oppressed and hereditary dance communities. This analysis is important because caste is often considered irrelevant to Indian-Americans' lived experiences in the US because of the racialization of Indians in the American context. Yet, as mentioned in the above scholarship, the classicization of Bharata Natyam depended upon the marginalizing of hereditary dancers. The presence of dominant-caste elites in the US after 1965 has also shaped the ways Bharata Natyam is represented by first-generation teachers and second-generation students. Therefore, a reckoning with caste is central to learning, teaching, and performing Bharata Natyam in the American context. In Chapter 2, I examine the conversations second-generation practitioners have on the appropriation, marginalization, and exclusion of hereditary dance practices and practitioners. These conversations are important for critically analyzing second-generation practitioners' emphasis on using Bharata Natyam as medium to address their political context, yet the aesthetic choices they make in their work continue to reinforce social hierarchies of caste.

Interrogating the Classical Indian Dance Genre

The term "classical" became associated with Indian dance forms in the 1930s as individuals from upper caste backgrounds like Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer sought to link these forms to Sanskritic sources like the *Natya Sastra*. South Asian dance

scholars and present-day practitioners contest the use of "classical" to discuss styles like Bharata Natyam as this process to establish "traditional" and "authentic" practices delinked these forms from hereditary dancers. This process marginalized and erased hereditary dancers from the histories of these styles (Purkayastha 2014, 8). Some of these authors contest the use of "classical" through defining the genres of modern and contemporary Indian dance. South Asian dance scholar Prarthana Purkayastha defines modern dance in India as a "clear rupture from the temple and court dance traditions of colonialism in the late nineteenth century, a conscious and critical engagement of dance with the political and the social domains, and a form where spirituality is negotiated and redistributed within a secular vision of the role of dance" (2014, 16). Purkayastha's definition of Indian modern dance as a genre pushes readers to revise and challenge commonly held understandings of the term "classical," a term that demonstrates the research "Indian cultural reformists and revivalists sought through pre-colonial, ancient texts and indigenous movements to highlight a "unique and unsullied past" (2014, 10). In her analysis of contemporary Indian dance in the US, South Asian dance scholar Ketu Katrak identifies as "contemporary" the ways second-generation choreographers utilize multiple movement forms to unsettle notions of fixed identity, transcend geographical boundaries, and engage with themes of freedom in fighting against racism and legacies of colonialism (2011, 156). In this dissertation, I build on these scholars' definitions of modern and contemporary Indian dance to define classical Indian dance in the US as a medium for second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners to transcend geographical boundaries and unsettle notions of fixed identity. In using the term "classical," to describe second-generation practitioners' choreographies, I assert that second-generation Indian American artists recognize the socio-political factors of colonialism that inform their practice.

Further scholarship on classical, modern, and contemporary dance on American concert stages raises research questions including the ways second-generation practitioners develop classical Indian dance in the US. Dance scholar SanSan Kwan examines the contemporary dance genre as it operates in three contexts in the US: concert dance, commercial dance, and world dance. Arguing that the term "contemporary" reveals artistic, cultural, and political prejudices in these three contexts, Kwan raises a key question when analyzing how the contemporary label operates in the world dance context: "how shall we consider practitioners of traditional world dance forms who are innovating within their tradition, without adopting the shapes of Western contemporary dance?" (2017, 15). I examine this question in analyzing how second-generation practitioners innovate within classical Indian dance without adopting the shapes of Western contemporary dance.

Critical examinations of the histories of modern and postmodern genres in Europe and America guide my analysis of the prejudices and exclusions second-generation practitioners face when having to classify their work as being either classical or contemporary in the US context. South Asian dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea argues that the histories of modern and postmodern dance in the West should be examined through an intercultural study because both of these genres have been deeply influenced in terms of content by "non-Western, non-white dance forms, against which they have sought to define themselves" (2004, 15). Second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners in the US negotiate Western perceptions that their work is tied to tradition, especially when it is contrasted with European and American dance labeled modern, postmodern, and contemporary. I build on Chatterjea's analysis to consider how second-generation practitioners establish classical Indian dance within the larger matrix of dance on American concert stages, as they fight notions that their practice is fixed and rooted in tradition.

Methodology

I engage methods of archival research, participant-observation ethnography, choreographic analysis, and discourse analysis for examining Bharata Natyam performance at the US-based festivals, competitions, concert stages, and online organizations and platforms. Through archival research, I examine newspaper reviews, brochures, photographs, and video recordings held in New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and The Ohio State University Archives. The materials I gathered during my research at these archival collections demonstrated evidence of the following Indian dance artists' US tours between 1920 and 1965: Roshanara, Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, Bissano Ram Gopal, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Indrani Rahman, and Shanta Rao. When I began my archival research, I focused primarily on Shankar and Gopal's US tours as I had encountered these artists' work through my earlier research on the emergence of South Asian dance practices in the US. However, once I started this dissertation research, I came across Roshanara, Devi, Chowdhury, Rahman, and Rao's names. My interest in researching their contributions to the development of South Asian dance in the US was solidified by the depth of materials I found under each of their names. By gathering materials about all of the artists mentioned above, I was able to establish a more robust presence of Indian dance on American concert stages in the 20th century than I had thought previously existed. In my previous research, I assumed that the high volume of Indian dance performances on American concert stages happened after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened up immigration from India. However, this archival research demonstrated the continuous circulation and transmission of Indian dance on American concert stages throughout the 20th century.

Through participant-observation ethnography, I attended some festival events in person and virtually attended others that were livestreamed. I interviewed Bharata Natyam practitioners and festival organizers through videoconferencing, to examine the significance of festivals, competitions, and online platforms for second-generation Indian American practitioners. More specifically, I conducted digital ethnography to study online festivals, competitions, and social media platforms. Digital ethnography refers to the ethnographic study of digital cultures, but it can also refer to the development and application of digital methodologies to enhance ethnographic research (Born and Haworth 2017, 70). When I first started this research in 2019, I planned to analyze a longer list of festivals and competitions. I attended one festival and one college competition in person. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I could only conduct my research virtually because the festivals I planned to attend in person were moved online. The benefits of conducting participant-observation ethnography virtually was that the materials were more accessible to me because I could tune in on my computer without having to travel. The drawback of not attending festivals and competitions in person was that I was not able to meet people there, schedule interviews on the spot, or have a kinesthetic sense of audience reactions to the work. Ultimately, the festivals and competitions I analyze in this dissertation are the ones I could attend in 2019 or could access online after 2020.

My embodied knowledge as a second-generation, upper caste Indian American Bharata Natyam practitioner guides how I interact with my source material. To do this, I engage what dance theorist Hannah Kosstrin describes as "kinesthetic seeing," which is a "modality in which researchers recognize movement in other people's bodies that they have practiced in their own" (2020, 19). Applying kinesthetic seeing to archival research enabled me to build dances from newspaper reviews, brochures, concert programs, and photographs, when there were no moving

images (see Kosstrin 2020, 21). However, I found myself experiencing what Kosstrin describes as "translating my contemporary embodiment into my best inference of the historical embodiment caused slippages in my critical inquiry" (Kosstrin 2020, 23). At times, I found myself assessing 20th century Indian dance artists' techniques as not being "precise," or typical of the way present-day Bharata Natyam practitioners perform these techniques, because I was assessing them through my particular embodiment of the *Tanjavur*[5] style of Bharata Natyam I had studied in Los Angeles, CA. These slippages were not specific to my conducting archival research because I also found myself making these assessments when I engaged in my participant-observation ethnography. These assessments illuminate the contradictions that emerge from my analysis on the ways second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners rework Bharata Natyam techniques to make it a relevant practice in the US. At times I struggled to recognize the transformations that practitioners trained in other Bharata Natyam styles make to the technique through my own embodiment of a particular Bharata Natyam style.

Postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks are important to my research for examining the complexities and contradictions of second-generation identity. I am particularly sensitive to these issues through my positionality as a second-generation, caste-privileged Hindu, Indian-American Bharata Natyam practitioner. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Mohanty says that "Third World women" or "women of color" scholars write/speak of a multiple consciousness that requires an understanding of multiple, often opposing ideas (2003, 15). Influenced by Mohanty's text, I ground my observations in and reflect on the complexities of my positionality as a second-generation

[5] The *Thanjavur* style of Bharata Natyam is considered to have originated from the Thanjavur royal court in Tamil Nadu, India.

Bharata Natyam dancer and researcher. Yet, in examining the complexities and contradictions of my positionality, I also must critically reflect on the ways I construct this identity. I also do not often consider the role that caste plays in my lived experiences in the US. As the anecdote with which I opened this introduction with highlights, my positionality, though a minority within the American cultural landscape, perpetuates a dominant-caste Indian American identity within global circulations of Indian culture. This also contradicts the desire to make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice that I'm invested in researching in this project. It is important to mark this contradiction in my research as I navigate the slippages in my observations of second-generation Indian Americans' reworkings of Bharata Natyam practice and my positionality.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is organized according to the sites in which second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners perform in the US: concert stages, festivals, competitions, and digital spaces. All of these contexts transform and are transformed by negotiations of representation, assimilation, and acculturation by second-generation practitioners. Second-generation Indian American practitioners transform Indian cultural attitudes in Bharata Natyam around notions of gender, religion, tradition, and nationalism through their cultural hybridity as they rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes in the US context. These shifts reflect the experiences of practitioners living in the United States, their desire to pursue Bharata Natyam professionally, and the stakes for second-generation practitioners to make Bharata Natyam practice visible and relevant in the US.

In Chapter One, "'Authentic Representations': The Development and Circulation of South Asian Dance on American Concert Stages in the 20th Century," I trace the emergence of

South Asian dance forms on American concert stages and the changing attitudes towards Indian dance both in India and the US through the US tours of Roshanara, Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, Bissano Ram Gopal, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Indrani Rahman, and Shanta Rao beginning in the early 20th century. At different points of the 20th century, these dancers came to the US from India or returned to India later in their careers to study classical Indian dance forms. These practitioners negotiated Orientalist perceptions of their identities and practices and their work sparked debates between dance critics in India and the US around the genre of classical Indian dance. The reviews of their work are important for understanding how American critics were teaching their audiences to view and understand first Hindu dance and later the Indian classical styles of Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Kathak, Mohini Attam, and Manipuri.

Through an analysis of newspaper reviews, programs, flyers, images, and videos, I argue that discourses of Orientalism and exoticism accompanied the circulation of South Asian dance practices in the US through the ways Indian dance practitioners and American dance critics familiarized audiences with classical Indian dance aesthetics between 1920 and 1965. I analyze the reception of South Asian artists on American concert stages in the 20th century through the lens of Orientalism because often critics used racist language to characterize these artists and their dance practices were characterized as ancient, spiritual, strange, and exotic. Historical and cultural factors like the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and American popular culture in the 1960s in which Americans sought Indian spirituality as an antidote to industrial-consumer society, shifted US audiences' desires to understand Indian dance practices. In this chapter, I examine newspaper reviews and other archival materials on Indian dance artists in the 20th century to provide context for understanding the emergence and popularity of classical Indian dance festivals, competitions, and social media platforms that I examine in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation. I examine 21st

century reviews on classical Indian dance festivals to also highlight the ways present-day Bharata Natyam practitioners negotiate US orientalism as they develop and rework Bharata Natyam for American concert stages. These reviews also provide further insight into the debates that continue into the 21st century around what is considered classical Indian dance.

In Chapter Two, "'Negotiating Tradition': Examining Aesthetic and Thematic Changes to Bharata Natyam Practice within US-based Classical Indian Dance Festivals" I examine the aesthetic and thematic changes that second-generation practitioners make in Bharata Natyam through the work they present at Indian classical dance festivals in the US and India. I argue that second-generation Indian American practitioners challenge and transform Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, tradition, and nationalism through practices manifesting cultural hybridity. The desire to transform Indian cultural attitudes further stems from a desire to make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice in the US, meaning making work that is accessible to audiences outside the South Asian diaspora in the US and increasing performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam practitioners to showcase their work. Making Bharata Natyam a relevant practice also means challenging who holds power and has privilege in the global Bharata Natyam community. The second-generation practitioners I discuss in this chapter are invested in breaking down hierarchies of caste and class in Bharata Natyam to make it a more inclusive space for groups who have been marginalized by Bharata Natyam practitioners. In making Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice, they rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media from within their own generational, political, social, and cultural context in the US.

To understand the importance of US-based Indian classical dance festivals in the South Asian diaspora and how second-generation practitioners shape and present their work at these

festivals, I first examine the relationship of US-based festivals to the Madras Music and Dance Season in Chennai, India as many of these festivals are marketed in relation to the size of the Madras Music and Dance Season. The conversations that take place at the Music and Dance Season around what is considered classical Indian dance impact how second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam as a diasporic practice in the US. Specifically, the conversations and debates around deviations from traditional repertoire formats, the roles of amateur performers, and the system of paying for performance opportunities impact how second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam as they consider making traditional repertoire pieces more accessible to audiences in the US and abroad. I then analyze the emergence of Indian classical dance and music festivals in the US and the importance of these festivals as platforms for second-generation practitioners to showcase their pursuits as professional artists and push the boundaries of traditional Bharata Natyam repertoires.

This chapter also analyzes how festival organizers shifted these festivals to online platforms in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to online platforms and the issues that second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners faced in 2020 around anti-Black racism, the marginalization of hereditary practitioners, and casteism, are integral to examining the aesthetic and thematic changes to the Bharata Natyam repertoire as second-generation practitioners negotiate their identities to make Bharata Natyam more inclusive and accessible to diverse audiences in the US. These changes highlight the importance of making Bharata Natyam a relevant practice that highlights their experiences of living in the US.

In Chapter Three, "'Going 'Viral:' The Role of Competition Platforms for Second-Generation Bharata Natyam Performances" I continue to examine the desire and the stakes for second-generation practitioners who seek to make Bharata Natyam more visible and accessible

to audiences in different parts of the world. They do so through increasing performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam dancers to showcase their work and increase the visibility of classical Indian dance practices. IndianRaga, an online classical Indian arts organization based out of Boston, Massachusetts, in-person and online competitions, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, provide tools for second-generation practitioners to rework Bharata Natyam themes and compositional elements in light of contemporary issues and media from within their own generational, political, and cultural context in the US. Further, as these online organizations and social media platforms make Bharata Natyam more visible and accessible to different audiences around the world, second-generation practitioners fuse different musical and dance styles to address specific themes and issues that are relevant to their lives in the 21st century. Within this discussion, I also analyze the popularity of online competitions. I contextualize this popularity by looking at the significance of different Indian dance competitions to highlight how second-generation Indian American practitioners manifest cultural hybridity through choreography, music, costumes, and set designs. I also analyze the importance of online organization, competitions, and social media platforms within the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and how second-generation practitioners are responding to the pandemic through their work. This analysis contributes to the discussion about how the uncertainty accompanying this global pandemic changes the circulation and reception of Bharata Natyam in the US.

Also in Chapter Three, I explain how "accessibility" is a double-edged issue. There are high costs in place for second-generation practitioners to access online platforms and competitions as spaces for reworking Bharata Natyam practice. Organizers and second-generation practitioners often do not acknowledge their class status in their ability to access

Bharata Natyam or make it more available to wide audience. Further, as second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam on these platforms, they also reinforce issues of Indian nationalism that celebrates an ancient, elite past as the foundation of the present-day (Indian) nation (O'Shea 2007, 72) in the diaspora in their promotional material, the events they perform at, and the ways they label their work once they receive a lot of views and "likes" on videos they upload to Instagram or TikTok. I examine the tension between reinforcing the issues second-generation practitioners want to challenge in their work (caste, class, gender, and nationalism) at the same time as I highlight the stakes for Indian-American dancers in the diaspora to develop Bharata Natyam in the US.

Though much research has focused on Bharata Natyam as a global dance form within multiple contexts, including the US, very little is known about the manner in which the cultural attitudes towards Bharata Natyam are being transformed by second-generation Indian American dancers navigating constantly between cultural attitudes in the US and India. Some of the literature focuses on rationales for second-generation Bharata Natyam dancers learning the form in the diaspora. Other research has focused on second-generation Indian American dancers who work outside the canon of classical Indian dance. This dissertation closes this gap by focusing on the ways in which Indian American practitioners operating within the classical canon redefine Bharata Natyam in the diaspora. Towards this end, I analyze the work presented on concert stages, at festivals, in competitions, and through online platforms by focusing on the circulation, transmission and transformation of Bharata Natyam practices in the US. I unpack the motivations of these dancers who continue to practice and perform to ensure that second-generation Indian Americans do not lose their connection to the cultural heritage of their immigrant parents at the same time that they navigate their dual identity. Although they were perhaps initially compelled

into dance by their parents, as artists these practitioners exhibit a strong desire to pursue Bharata Natyam professionally. This desire manifests in the ever-expanding performances, festivals and competitions which provide more opportunities for second-generation Indian Americans to perform in the US without having to travel to India to begin their professional careers as dancers. This dissertation demonstrates the importance second-generation Bharata Natyam dancers contribute to transforming and increasing the visibility of classical Indian dance to reflect their hybrid American lived experiences.

Chapter One

"Authentic Representations": The Development and Circulation of South Asian Dance on American Concert Stages in the 20th Century

Introduction

In a review of the third annual Drive East Festival of Indian dance in 2014, *New York Times* dance critic Alastair Macaulay wrote, "it's marvelous how much Indian dance is reaching New York and other American cities" (2014). In his observations, Macaulay discussed the variety of styles of Indian dance performed at these festivals (and he mentioned the following classical Indian dance styles: Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Odissi, Sattriya), and also the different Indian dance festivals in New York City like Erasing Borders, the World Music Institute's Dancing the Gods festival, and festivals in other American cities like the Maximum India festival in Washington D.C. and the Traditions Engaged festival in San Francisco, California. Macaulay's review highlights the continued presence and popularity of South Asian dance practices in the United States where audiences can watch and study a range of Indian arts practices. Yet, Macaulay's comments seem to suggest that the popularity of these practices is a novel 21st century phenomenon when in fact audiences in New York and other American cities have consistently watched and studied classical Indian dance styles since the early 20th century. Thus, not only has Indian dance continually reached audiences across American cities, but critics' attitudes have influenced American perceptions of Indian dance for just as long.

In this chapter, I trace the emergence of South Asian dance forms on American concert stages and the changing attitudes towards Indian dance both in India and the US through the US tours of Roshanara, Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, Bissano Ram Gopal, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Indrani Rahman, and Shanta Rao beginning in the early 20th century. My interest in researching these artists' contributions to the development of South Asian dance in the US was solidified by the depth of materials I found in the archives. At different points of the 20th century, these dancers came to the US from India or returned to India later in their careers to study classical Indian dance forms. These practitioners negotiated Orientalist perceptions of their identities and practices and their work sparked debates between dance critics in India and the US around the genre of classical Indian dance. The reviews of their work are important for understanding how American critics were teaching their audiences to view and understand first what was then termed Hindu dance and later the Indian classical styles of Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Kathak, Mohini Attam, and Manipuri. Although the main focus of my dissertation is on Bharata Natyam, this chapter introduces Indian dance writ large and how the US tours of the artists discussed above opened up the transmission of Indian dance to the US.

American dance critics' reviews of Roshanara's, Devi's, Shankar's, Gopal's, Chowdhury's, Rahman's, and Rao's tours provide insight on the changing attitudes towards Indian dance and dancers in both the US and India. For example, American dance critic John Martin's reviews of Shankar's performances highlight the ways American audiences first experienced Shankar's work and their perception of him as an authentic representative of Indian dance. Martin was a famous dance critic for the *New York Times* whose writings established modern dance in the US. As classical Indian dance became more codified in India starting in the 1930s, Martin's reviews on Shankar's US tours until the 1960s cast light on the changing

attitudes in the US and India towards Shankar's dancing. Shankar's dances, although they were theatrical products and not always representative of "classical" Indian dances, served as the basis of American audiences' interests in authenticity. Martin and other American dance critics' writings on Indian dance practitioners' performances popularized Indian dance on American stages in the early 20th century.

Through an analysis of newspaper reviews, programs, flyers, images, and videos, I argue that discourses of Orientalism and exoticism accompanied the circulation of South Asian dance practices in the US through the ways Indian dance practitioners and American dance critics familiarized audiences with classical Indian dance aesthetics between 1920 and 1965. Through the lens of Orientalism, I analyze the reception of South Asian artists on American concert stages beginning in the late 19th century and through the 20th century because often these artists and their dance practices were characterized as ancient, spiritual, strange, and exotic. In his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said defines perceptions and depictions of the East by the West. The East, or as Said labels it in his text as "the Orient," is comprised of Asia, North Africa, and Middle East. The West or "the Occident" is comprised of the colonizer societies in Europe, Australia, and the Americas. Said argues that the patronizing perception and fictional depictions of the East as "feminine, timeless, spiritual, hypersexual, irrational" (1978, 5) exaggerate the difference between the East and the West that assumes Western superiority. Western representations of the alien "Orient," especially in stereotypes of the Middle East, came to serve as implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions. Orientalism provides a framework for analyzing the reception of South Asian artists on American concert stages beginning in the late 19th century when Indian dancers first appeared on concert stages. These dancers initially were received well by American audiences who expected these dancers to

be "exotic," which meant they expected dancers to perform erotic pieces. However, when American audiences saw these performers as not being exotic enough, American concert producers removed these dancers from concert stages. The erasure of Indian dancing bodies from American concert stages since the late 19th century because they were not seen as exotic or sensual enough, continued to implicate the dancers discussed in this chapter when they negotiated American Orientalist perceptions of India through their work.

In order to better understand this shift in Western audiences, I examine newspaper reviews and other archival materials focusing on Indian dance artists in the 20th century to provide context for understanding the emergence and popularity of classical Indian dance festivals, competitions, and social media platforms that I examine further in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation. Historical and cultural factors like the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924,[6] and the popularity of the Beatles in the 60s[7] shifted US audiences' desire to understand Indian dance practices. Later, American dance critics' reviews of the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance and Drive East Festivals in New York City, NY, taught American audiences how to view these forms. Yet these reviewers continue to perpetuate similar Orientalist observations found in 20th century reviews on Indian dance when they write that classical Indian dance is "sacred" or "distant." I conclude the chapter with an examination of 21st century reviews on classical Indian dance festivals to also highlight the ways present-day Bharata Natyam practitioners negotiate US orientalism as they develop and rework Bharata Natyam for American concert stages. These

[6] The Immigration Act of 1924, or Johnson-Reed Act was a United States federal law that prevented immigration from Asia and set quotas on the number of immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere.
[7] In the 1960s, the popularity of Indian music and dance grew through Ravi Shankar's collaborations with jazz musician John Coltrane and The Beatles' member George Harrison. The popularity of Indian dance in the 1960s reflected the demand for Indian spirituality as an antidote to an industrial-consumer society (Prashad 2000, 51).

reviews also provide further insight into the debates that continue into the 21st century around what is considered classical Indian dance.

To examine Indian dance on American stages, I define the terms classical, tradition, and authenticity. These terms frame the ways Indian artists develop and circulate dance through their US tours. As I discuss in the Introduction, and continue to elaborate in Chapters 2 and 3, the term "classical" became associated with Indian dance forms in the 1930s as individuals from upper caste and class backgrounds like Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer sought to link these forms to Sanskritic sources like the *Natya Sastra*. South Asian dance scholars and present-day practitioners contest the use of "classical" to discuss styles like Bharata Natyam as this process to establish "traditional" and "authentic" practices delinks these forms from *devadasis*, referred to as hereditary dancers in the present context (O'Shea 2007, Srinivasan 2011, Kedhar 2019). Upper caste and class practitioners of the newly recognized "classical" forms appropriated hereditary dancers' practices and in doing so, marginalized and erased hereditary dancers and their caste positions from the histories of these styles (Purkayastha 2014, 8). The Indian dance practitioners I discuss in this chapter either played a role in establishing Indian classical dances as authentic or traditional, or found their work at odds with this label when these classical dances become more codified. Indian dancers negotiated these terms differently throughout the 20th century as they established and popularized Indian dance on American stages. To examine the impact of Indian dancers' tours in the US starting in the 1920s, I briefly discuss the circulation of Indian dance practices starting in the late 19th century.

The Circulation of "Nautch" Dance in the late 19th Century

> Their dances do not resemble what Americans are accustomed to call dances. They consist of lithe and graceful whirling, marvelous in its quickness, and also of mystic weaving and subtle pantomimic contortions explained by their songs. Their dances have a meaning, and the sentiment of them is always made plain. They cover a wide range of subjects. (*The Washington Post* 1880)

The above quote from a review titled "Dancing Girls from India: The Troupe That is to Perform the Nautch Dance in New York," described the "nautch" dancers' movements when they first performed in the US in the 19th century. "Nautch" is an anglicization of *nach*, a Hindi word for dance (O'Shea 2007, 48). The implications of labeling women from India as "nautch" dancers in the 1880s made it impossible to determine where they were from since the term was used for all Indian and some Middle Eastern dance practices. This led to "nautch women [being seen as] a curiosity and an exotic commodity on the American landscape in 1880" (Srinivasan 2011, 40). The idea of nautch dancers as an exotic commodity had already been circulating in the US since Indian Orientalist texts such as the Bhagavad Gita[8] "influenced those who have been recognized as quintessential early American writers of the transcendental movement" (Srinivasan 2011, 52). The notion of "Indian" in American thought that circulated through the works of 19th century authors Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as translations of esoteric, philosophical, and spiritual texts from Asia into English is what South Asian scholar Vijay Prashad terms "textual orientalism." Through textual orientalism, translations of Indian philosophical and spiritual texts were meant to combat the alienation caused by industrialism

[8] The Bhagavad Gita is an episode from the *Hindu* text, the *Mahabharata*. This episode is composed in a dialogue in the form of a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Krishna, an avatar (incarnation) of the god Vishnu.

(Prashad 2000, 20). American authors' focus on nautch dancing generated this curiosity about India, thus further providing a way for American dance critics, impresarios, and audiences to gain access to what they described as the exotic and spiritual Indian culture, a culture they believed would transform them into spiritual yet material beings.

Human interest articles on Indian culture in the late 19th century provide further examples of textual orientalism. This was because American merchants wrote about Indian dancers witnessed during their travels. Dance theorist Priya Srinivasan explains that "trade between the United States and India has been ongoing since the eighteenth century, and an imagined exoticism of Indian goods and bodies was pervasive, not only among elites but also among some middle-and-working-class people" (2011, 52). In 1880 in the US, one author wrote about child marriages in India at that time. To provide context for Indian marriages broadly, the author described the importance of dance in Indian weddings:

> Native dances or *nauches*, as they are termed, are performed by a certain class of women. These are not necessarily bad; many of them are women of great wealth; as a successful *danseuse* is very soon able to realize a fortune by the curious figures she postures and the unmusically nasal songs she sings. Ultimately their dances are peculiar. (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1880).

The author's discussion of *nautch* reinforces the assumptions that *nautch* dancers in the late 19th century were, in the words of a critic from the Indian publication, *Times of India* "indecent, unsophisticated, and odd" (1882) through the description of *nautch* dances as "peculiar" set to "unmusically nasal songs." This description portrayed Indian women as inferior others even in

the statement "that they are not necessarily bad." Further, the author introduces readers to caste and valuing high-caste positions in stating "that they are not necessarily bad" because these dances are performed by a "certain class of women, many of them of great wealth" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1880). Nineteenth-century racist stereotypes of Indian women marking them as inferior were reinforced by the author's argument that "Hindoos [*sic*] should do away with early marriage," his conclusion that "it is on this account (of early marriage) that the Hindoo [*sic*] is physically inferior to the European and other race" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1880). This article, along with the earlier review discussed in this section, which described the dancers' beauty as a "matter of taste" and that "they were much petted by the passengers" on their travels by boat to the US, highlights the racialization of Indian dancers that Srinivasan writes, was needed to "define and constitute the boundaries of whiteness and Americanness" (2011, 61). As newspapers in the late-1800s published features on nautch dancing, these articles demonstrate how the discourses of casteism, Orientalism, and US racialization in the 19th century implicated Indian dancers as inferior or sexually available in order to define the boundaries of Americanness.

The orientalist fantasy surrounding Indian dancers had deep implications for the trajectory of Indian dance in India as well as the US. In India, Srinivasan and O'Shea point to the anti-nautch movement that began in 1892. This movement mobilized against the dedication of women and girls as *devadasis* to ritual service and their related performance practice. Translated as "anti-dance," the anti-nautch movement focused on the status of women and the social structures around ritual dedication. As O'Shea explains, "anti-nautch activists attempted to eradicate courtesanship by abolishing the hereditary offices of temple and court service and by

eliminating the performance of *sadir*" (2007, 30).[9] The Indian anti-nautch movement began as Indian nationalists opposing the colonial government linked hereditary practitioners to prostitution and urged a "boycott of nautch dancing at formal occasions" (Srinivasan 2011, 70). Although anti-nautch activists did not secure legislation against dedication until the year of India's independence in 1947, the early years of the twentieth century had eroded public support for dance and pushed *sadir* to the margins of social life. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, "*sadir* remained stigmatized, and respectable elites frowned upon its performance" (O'Shea 2007, 31). This perception through the same colonial-elitist currents also impacted the ways Americans received Indian dancers when dance critics wrote about how *devadasis* "corrupted" Hindu dance. The reviews published in the 1880s on Indian dancers who performed on US stages predates the beginning of the anti-nautch movement, yet the future of Indian dance was impacted through American racialization and orientalism. In the late 20th century, Indian dancers would continue to travel and stay in the US where they performed on the street, in the circus with P.T. Barnum, in dime museums, and in sideshows. However, by 1907, "nautch dancers had disappeared from the US stage" due to the growing anti-Asian sentiment that I discuss in the next section (Srinivasan 2012, 43). When Indian dancers returned to India from their US performances at the beginning of the 20th century, the anti-nautch campaign was in full swing in India as a result of colonialist and nationalist pressures. As a result, most Indian dancers were forced to leave their art form behind and turn to other professions. The arrival and disappearance of nautch dancers from US and Indian stages had deep ramifications for Indian dance and dancers in the early 20th century. In the next section, I focus on the individual

[9] *Sadir* was a primarily solo form practiced by *devadasis*, courtesans affiliated with temples and courts as performers and ritual officiants. *Sadir* was Bharata Natyam's immediate predecessor (O'Shea 2007, 4).

performances of Indian dance artists who negotiated colonialist and nationalist pressures in India and US orientalist discourses.

"Hindu" Dance Performances in the Early 20th Century

In this section, I examine the ways Roshanara (and briefly Ruth St. Denis), and later Ragini Devi in the 1920s, introduced Indian dance practices to American audiences. These dancers' whiteness and upper-class status enabled them to perform Indian dance respectably in the eyes of American audience members, whereas dancers of color were marked as excessively sexual or less than human, signifiers that marked them as "other" (Desmond 1991, 43). Their ability to "familiarize and domesticate the foreign, even polluted, body of the Oriental 'other' made their performances safer for American audiences" (Srinivasan 2012, 81). Roshanara, St. Denis, and Ragini Devi were all considered exponents of Hindoo[10] [*sic*] dance, a term that American dance critics and audiences used pejoratively to label dance practices from India. American dance critics and audiences would continue to label Indian dance practices as "Hindu," until the 1960s, as evidenced by descriptions of Uday Shankar's work, even as they were also starting to identify Indian dances as either classical or folk. These dancers' performances not only popularized Indian dance in America, but played a role in establishing classical Indian dance forms in India and the US. Their performances impacted the trajectory of classical Indian dance in India that aligned these practices with Indian nationalist, upper caste practitioners.

Roshanara (1894-1926)

[10] Similar to dance historian Susan Manning's use of the term Negro dance in her text *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race In Motion,* I am using Hindoo [*sic*] or Hindu dance as a historical term that carries Orientalist implications, but I do not intend to reproduce the terms' racist discourses (2004, xxvi)

In 1918, Ethel Thurston interviewed dancer Roshanara (born Olive Katherine Craddock) for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. When asked about the audience reception of her work, Roshanara answered that she was the first white woman to study and dance what she called "native" Indian dances and that her dancing generated curiosity among audiences in India, the UK, and later the US. She explained that Indian people were flattered by the interest she showed in studying Indian dance forms. In her attempt to express the best that there was in Indian dance forms, Roshanara noted that she was also showing the ways "the modern Nautch girl had abused and neglected it" (Thurston 1918). Roshanara's answers reinforced the troublesome rhetoric of the anti-nautch campaign that painted devadasis as "corrupt," in the 20th century. Further, her answers reinforced her whiteness that enabled her to perform Indian dance respectably while maintaining her proximity to racialized Indian dancers:

> I was born in India but I am not a half-caste. I am an English girl. My father was an Irishman and an official, while my mother is an English woman, and I took up dancing because I felt a desire to revive some of the fine qualities of an art that has been degraded and fallen into disrepute in India. I am proud to say that in some measure, I succeeded in what I set out to do. Where I have danced in India natives of the better classes and scholars have generously recognized my work and have applauded my efforts to lift their dancing art out of the slough into which it descended. (Thurston 1918)

Reviews of Roshanara's work starting in 1914 labeled her as an exponent of what at the time was termed Hindoo [*sic*] dance due to the fact that she was born in India and studied Indian dance there. At the same time of Roshanara's tours, American dance critics also wrote about another

famous performer, Ruth St. Denis. In these critics' reviews, St. Denis was credited as having "conceived and developed the Hindoo (*sic*) dances, and [stood] out among all proponents of this type of dancing" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917). These dancers being credited as establishing what was called Hindu dance at the time demonstrates the Orientalist discourses that enabled them to perform Indian dance authentically.

The circulation of Indian dance at the beginning of the 20th century was impacted by anti-Asian sentiment amidst changing immigration laws. When Indian dancers first appeared on concert stages in 1880, audiences were curious about these dancers due to the popular expectations of "imagined Oriental bodies of temple and court dancers, swathed in jewels and rich silks, doing sexy, erotic dances to tantalize men" (Srinivasan 2011, 58). However, due to these Orientalist stereotypes, the expectation that these dancers would be more sensual than Western dancers was not met. Reviewers wrote that the dance technique was not erotic or titillating, that they were "not showing enough skin," and were not "beautiful enough," and because of this disappointment, presenters in the US refused to produce concerts devoted to Indian dance. The growing anti-Asian sentiment that started at the end of the 19th century would, decades later, impact the 1923 court case *United States v Bhagat Singh Thind.* Thind, who moved to the US from India in 1913, was first granted citizenship in the state of Washington in 1918, but the Immigration and Natural Service rescinded it. He applied for and received his citizenship a second time in the state of Oregon in 1920, but the Immigration and Natural Service appealed it and sent his case to the Supreme Court. With his case, the Supreme Court ruled against Thind, a decision that revoked citizenship granted to Indians. Many Indians in America were forced to leave the United States and return to India (SAADA, n.d.). The hostility Indian dancers experienced in 1880 from American audiences' disappointment that their orientalist

expectation was not met offer insights into racial discrimination, anti-Asian sentiment, and exclusion laws long before 1923. The erasure of Indian dancing bodies from American concert stages amidst an immigration landscape that denaturalized US citizenship for Indians would have large ramifications for the future of Indian dance in the United States.

Even though anti-Asian sentiment and exclusion laws led to the erasure of Indian dancers from American concert stages, their dances practices remained in circulation. More specifically, their kinesthetic traces remained as white women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries absorbed Indian dance practices. As an example, Srinivasan examines the emergence of St. Denis as a solo performer, emphasizing that "by the time Indian women dancers disappeared from US stages, "'Oriental dance' was reborn in a white American dancer [as] St. Denis absorbed the practices of the Indian dancers she encountered at Coney Island in 1904" (2011, 64). The reviews of St. Denis and Roshanara's work highlight this absorption, as they were lauded for conceiving and developing Hindu dances. The removal of brown dancing bodies was also integral to the development of modern dance as the bodily labor and contributions of these dancers could remain unacknowledged and hidden.

St. Denis and Roshanara's careers took off in the 20th century because their whiteness enabled them to perform Indian dance respectably as "authentic" Indian dancers. The notion of what was "authentic" in the Indian dances of St. Denis and Roshanara diverged greatly. Reviews of St. Denis's solo performances, starting with the 1906 performance of *Radha*, would state that St. Denis "reincarnated herself as a Hindoo [*sic*] god after visiting a Hindoo [*sic*] temple" (*The Washington Post* 1906). Other early reviews of her work also wrote about her identity as a young American woman from New Jersey, who never visited India to create the dances she was performing. A 1907 *Los Angeles Times* review highlighted this point wherein the author wrote

that St. Denis hoped to "dance in the holiest temples of the great founder of the faith"…yet before she can perform there, "…she must prove that which she ardently claims – that she is the reincarnation of Radah [*sic*], favorite wife of Krishna, one of the most venerated deities of the Hindu faith" (*Los Angeles Times* 1907). St. Denis's quest for authenticity was emphasized in the same review, where she absurdly stated that "the applause of kings she has counted as nothing compared to the statements of venerable Buddhists she has met from time to time, that she reproduces exactly all the steps of the dances described by tradition to Radah [*sic*]" (*Los Angeles Times* 1907). St. Denis's ability to embody the Hindu spirit of Radha was aided by Indian male performers who toured with her across the United States between 1909 and 1914. For example, in a 1909 *New York Times* review, the author wrote "…there were a houseful of people to see her, an orchestra under the direction of Walter Meyrowitz to furnish her with music, and a company of Hindoos [*sic*] to assist her by supplying a realistic background for the stories she told in her posturings" (*New York Times* 1909). Indeed, a Jacob's Pillow recording of *Radha* from 1941 shows St. Denis twirling while waving her arms between two rows of Indian male dancers who are seated and still (St. Denis 1941) Indian male performers would often go unacknowledged in reviews of St. Denis's work, yet they were integral in producing the authenticity that St. Denis strove for in performing Indian dance (Srinivasan 2011, 68).

Roshanara's proximity to Indian informants also aided her representation of authentic Indian dancing. Reviews of Roshanara's performances starting in 1911 emphasized her study of dance in India. She asserted her authenticity by pointing out that she studied and performed Indian dances in India gave her authority over these dances. Dance critics highlighted her authority as a celebrated authentic Indian dancer in their reviews of her London performances where she was a featured dancer in Oscar Asche's *Kismet* and in the Ballet Russes's production

of *Scheherazade*. In an interview that highlighted her dancing in *Scheherazade*, Roshanara discussed her training in India, that all she knew about dancing she had "learned from watching the dancers of India" (*The Evening Standard* 1911). Roshanara's observations of dancing throughout India led her to develop her performance repertoire that included pieces such as "…the Dagger Dance, the Incense Dance, the Snake Dance, the Village Dance, the Nautch, and the God Dance" (*The Evening Standard* 1911). These pieces remained in her repertoire when she started performing in the US with Russian-born American ballet dancer and choreographer Adolf Bolm and his company, Ballet-Intime. In 1917, Roshanara started her own company, Roshanara's Danse Divertissements, performing alongside Japanese dancer Michio Ito and Danish dancer Tulle Lindahl, and others of her company members. In 1924, Roshanara started performing with musician Ratan Devi (born Alice Ethel Richardson). Ratan Devi was a white British woman who studied Indian music and performed regularly in the US and Britain. She was married to Ananda Coomaraswamy, a historian and philosopher of Indian art who was considered an early interpreter of Indian culture to the West. Coomaraswamy authored the text, *The Mirror of Gesture*, a translation of the *Abhinaya Darpana*. This text provided context for Indian dance practices to US dance critics and audiences in the 1930s (a fact emphasized in reviews of Uday Shankar's US performances). American dance critics and audiences praised Roshanara and Ratan Devi as interpreters of Indian culture to the West when they performed together. A dance critic from *The Times of India* wrote that "Roshanara's rendering of Indian Dances is a revelation of grace and beauty" and that she thoroughly enters into the spirit of her subject that it is "difficult to realize that she is not herself a native of the country whose art she has studied so closely" (Programs – Roshanara's Danse Divertissements, n.d.). Of Ratan Devi's singing, Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote that "neither tunes nor times were the least

modified to make them simpler or to suit them to the European training of the singer…that the music was immaculately Indian…and there was not a sign of effort in her beautiful voice" (Programs – Roshanara's Danse Divertissements, n.d.). Roshanara and Ratan Devi's study of Indian arts in India cemented their status as "authentic" representatives of Indian culture. Because there was a small (and continuously dwindling) number of Indians in the US, St. Denis, Roshanara, and Ratan Devi seized representational control of Indian dances and reconfigured these dances through their own framework.

Hindu dance flourished in the West especially in the first part of the twentieth century because white female performers' representations of Indian culture were unchallenged. However, their efforts to achieve authenticity that perpetuated orientalist fantasies were sometimes challenged. For instance, in a 1911 review in *The New York Times*, a dancer named Princess Sita Diva performed an Indian dance program "devoted to a description of the life of the women in India, illustrated by several typical costumes" at the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York City. The reviewer described Princess Sita Diva as the daughter of an Indian prince who was dedicated to a temple as a child. Below is a description of the pieces she performed:

> The Princess gave a serpent dance in which a live snake had a part, and also presented what she explained was a sacred temple dance, never witnessed by any Hindus outside those of the highest caste. This proved to be a sort of "temptation dance," used, in her playlet, to entice the soldier into drinking the drugged wine she offered him, and it allowed the dancer full opportunity to display her grace of body as well as her ability as a pantomimist. (*New York Times* 1911)

As a part of her program she conducted a question and answer session where "she answered a number of questions of her by women in the audience, and patiently listened to a Hindu in the top balcony, who tried to offer objections to her calling herself a Princess" (*New York Times* 1911). There is some ambiguity in regard to the identities of the participants in this interaction both on the part of the critic and the audience member(s). However, this objection provides some proof that American performers and their audiences still fell under the sway of Orientalism. This one sentence may offer some insight into the ways Indians in the US fought US Orientalism amidst anti-Asian US immigration laws that were removing Indian dancers from concert stages.

Ragini Devi (1893-1982)

In the 1920s, another female exponent of the then-labeled Hindu dance, started performing on New York concert stages. This review published in 1927 highlighted Ragini's performance at the Hampden Theatre in New York City. Ragini, a "Hindu singer and dancer," performed "…dances, curiously restrained and decorous, more in set gestures than in action, were the traditional dances of Hindu village maidens" (*New York Times* 1927). This early review of Ragini Devi (born Esther Luella Sherman) signified her presence and impact as "an American-born dancer who introduced India's classical dances to many in this country and who played a leading role in their revival within India itself" (Kisselgoff 1982). Born in Michigan in 1896, Ragini Devi first developed a fascination with India through her study of Indian history and art at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul. At the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, she met her husband Ramalal Balram Bajpai, who was enrolled at the university in 1916. They were married in the United States at the time when Indian immigrants' claims to citizenship were

challenged. Ragini Devi began performing in New York City when she and her husband moved there in 1920. In 1930, they moved to India where she studied the emerging classical Indian dance styles of Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, and Odissi. Prior to moving to India, she published her first book, *Nritanjali: An Introduction to Hindu Dancing*, considered to be the "first book in English on Indian dance" (Kisselgoff 1982). Devi's publication of *Nritanjali* and her performance career starting in the 1920s fostered a transnational conversation between India and the US on the classicization of Indian dance.

Though limited copies were published, Ragini Devi's *Nritanjali* introduced US audiences to the components that comprise Hindu dance like the symbolism of *mudras*, the Hindu gods depicted through dance pieces, and the influence of the *Natya Shastra* in codifying Hindu dance movements. There are pictures throughout the text that provide examples of these components as she explains what makes Indian dance practices unique from Western forms. For example, her explanation for the *rasa* or emotive state *vir*, which translates to heroic mood, is accompanied by a picture of Ragini Devi lunging forward, arms bent, and hands holding a soft and relaxed palm, while her fingers are curled in towards the palm. Her expression is serious and focused, and her pose is highlighted by a large, gold headpiece, a short top and mid-length skirt (that appear to be constructed with gold fabric) (Devi 1928, 13). A key message throughout the text is why Americans should learn and appreciate Indian art forms. In the Introduction, "Hindu Music and Dancing in America," guest writer author Mary K. Das of Munich, Germany states:

> India's contribution to the cultural life of the world is immense. In religion, philosophy and positive science, the influence of Hindu thought has been permanent; and today this fact is universally recognized. Hindu influence in the fine arts – architecture, painting,

> music, etc. – is no less significant, although less recognized by the people of the West. (Devi 1928, 13)

Das notes that Hindu dancing is attracting the attention of many who seek charm and beauty of human movements and expressions, such as Ruth St. Denis who "introduced a few postures of Hindu dancing in her program" and Anna Pavlova who incorporated Hindu dancing in her ballet productions. In writing the forward for this book, Das declared that the Indian arts are "one of the finest phases of Hindu life – their music and dancing must not be allowed to remain unknown to the world" (Devi 1928, 17). Das's comments introduce the influence of India's ancient and spiritual culture on Western culture, thus reinforcing textual orientalism.

Devi's words throughout the text emphasize US orientalist discourses in the way she proposes that Hindu dances should not be viewed as entertainment but that, instead, Americans should appreciate its spiritual component. Further, she advocates for Americans to learn more about Hindu dance to transform American attitudes towards dance as entertainment in the US. In the last chapter, "Race-Spirit and Dance," Ragini Devi states that because the "ancient dances of the East have a deeper meaning than the mere outward expression of exotic patterns," these practices are important for Americans to view and understand, especially those who "seek diversion and forgetfulness in the thrills of spectacular entertainment where music is loud and dancers present their snappiest and most astonishing steps, bringing to their aid acrobatic devices of every conceivable sort" (Devi 1928, 80). In addition to establishing the importance of Hindu dance in transforming American attitudes towards dance as entertainment, *Nritanjali* also establishes Ragini Devi's thorough knowledge of ancient Hindu music and dance and her ability to interpret Hindu music and dance so that the West can appreciate and understand" (Devi 1928,

18) As Das states in the Introduction, "[we] are grateful to Ragini for her work of introducing and popularizing something so beautiful of the life of The Orient; and the people of India may well be proud of her achievement and devotion to her mission" (Devi 1928, 19). Ragini's *Nritanjali* was published four years before the *Natya Shastra* became integral to codifying classical Indian dance practices. This text would be recognized by dance critics and practitioners in the US and India as central to generating interest in reviving classical Indian dance in both countries.

After spending time in India studying and performing the emerging classical Indian dance styles, Ragini Devi returned to the US in the 1940s and these tours continued to highlight her role in popularizing and reviving classical Indian dance in the US and India. In *The Washington Post*, the author stated that Ragini Devi "…praised by the poet Tagore, and invited to dance before maharajas…presented the sacred and provincial dances in their traditional form as handed down by Brahmin masters for 2000 years" (*The Washington Post* 1947). In this program, she wore "authentic costumes and head dresses of great beauty, many of them gifts of maharajas and temple priests" (*The Washington Post* 1947). In their performances at the beginning of the 20th century, Ragini Devi, along with Roshanara and St. Denis, used the representative power of their whiteness to authentically represent Indian dances to US audiences. This was because of the absence of Indian dancers at the beginning of the 20th century that enabled American audiences to accept white dancers' as "safer" alternatives to Indian practitioners (Srinivasan 2012, 81). After 1931, however, the increasing number of performances by Indian dancers who had entered the United States temporarily on visitor visas disrupted this control and the orientalist narrative previously constructed on the bodies of white women would become "inauthentic" (Srinivasan 2011, 108). This shift occurred in the US tours of Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and Bhaskar Roy

Chowdhury between 1930 and 1960. These tours continued to introduce audiences to Indian dance as these artists grappled with orientalist perceptions of their work, while also grappling with the shifting landscape of classical dance in India.

Hindu Dance Expanded: Tours of Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, 1930 to 1960

I begin this section with a review of Uday Shankar's US debut at The International Dance Festival in 1932 John Martin stated that "Uday Shan-Kar, the Hindu dancer, is an artist in the universal sense, [as] he is able to illuminate for the Western mind the dancing of his people – an art so delicate and with so many ramifications" (*New York Times* 1933). Shankar's ability to clearly convey Indian dances to American audiences, to "objectify something of this rare and remote beauty" (*New York Times* 1933) is important as Martin notes:

> When the Westerner approaches the dance of the East it is useless for him to attempt to "understand" it. Viewing these dances certainly requires no scholarship, no special aesthetic equipment, to respond to such gay and charming stuff as this, however much it may mean under the surface. These dances are completely impracticable for a Westerner to grasp them, for with the exception of Coomaraswamy's "The Mirror of Gesture" and a little brochure by Ragini entitled "Nritanajali," there is practically nothing on the subject in English and audiences should enjoy them for the delightful experience it is. (Martin 1933)

Martin's review of Shankar's first US performance highlights how Shankar was implicated within discourses of representation, abstraction, and Orientalism. The critic suggests that Shankar was viewed as an "acceptable" Indian male dancer because his art could transcend his identity, thus making him an ideal representative of Indian dance. Martin's review raises issues that Shankar, along with other Indian dance practitioners arriving in the US after 1930, faced around being an ideal and accepted Indian dance representative for American audiences. That Martin praised Shankar for transcending his identity while at the same time marked Shankar's dance as different (by teaching audiences about *mudras* while also stating that it was impossible for audiences to try and understand these dances), thus implicates Shankar in US racialization that continued to characterize Indian dancers and dances as being performed for American audiences' superficial enjoyment.

In this section, I examine reviews of Shankar's, Gopal's, and Chowdhury's work in the mid 20th century and how these writings popularized notions of Indian dance in United States and India. The emergence of dance practitioners from India in the US after 1931 shifted control of the then-called Hindu dance to upper-caste Indian males. This shift rendered white women's Hindu dance representations inauthentic. In analyzing the dancers' work between 1930 and 1960, I argue that their positionalities as upper caste Indian males who lived in and traveled all over Europe and the US shaped the reception of their work and popularity as representative of both an "authentic" Indian context and an "internationalized-cosmopolitan" context. In "Choreographing Modern Mexico: Anna Pavlova in Mexico City (1919)" dance historian José Reynoso defines the term "internationalized-cosmopolitan" to highlight these artists' status as cultural elites that enabled them to recognizably assimilate into a notion of universal whiteness, while at the same time maintaining difference (Reynoso 2014, 88). Shankar, Gopal, and Chowdhury enabled critics

to also view aspects of their work as innovative and abstract, aligned with notions of universalism and abstraction within modernism that made them ideal representatives of Indian culture in the US. Yet, their work was marked as distinctly different on American stages as they deliberately played to the Orientalist gaze that audiences imposed on these artists. I analyze the reception of their tours in the US alongside the development and revival of classical Indian dance forms in the 1930s. Indian dance critics communicated Indian classical dance aesthetics to American dance critics, thus shaping the ways in which they trained American audiences to view elements of Indian dance in Shankar's, Ram Gopal's, and Chowdhury's performances. The artists' positionalities and performance careers both exemplify and complicate issues of representation, abstraction, and authenticity within the racial and gendered implications of Orientalism, the implications of which absorb and retain the practices of marginalized cultures and communities, while excluding the very bodies that inform and influence these practices and histories. These implications are evident in the ways early 20th century dancers appropriated nautch dancers' practices while immigration laws like the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 excluded these dancers from making visible their influence on these early 20th century dancers.

Uday Shankar (1900-1977)

Issues of authenticity and representation within the context of US orientalism emerge in Shankar's first tour with Anna Pavlova's troupe in 1923. Pavlova was a popular Russian ballerina during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Reynoso 2014, 89). In *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar*, Mohan Khokar discusses this tour by first providing details on how Shankar came to work with Pavlova in the first place. Prior to meeting Pavlova, Shankar was living in London and studying painting at the Royal College of Art, intent on pursuing a

career as a painter. However, “the meeting with Anna Pavlova turned out to be a turning point in Shankar’s life, and indeed, for Indian dance,” and Shankar decided to suddenly switch from a career in painting to dancing (Khokar 1983, 23). Khokar notes that Shankar had no formal training in dance at the start of his dance career, however, he had observed the folk dances of Rajasthan while growing up in India and these observations informed the “two miniature ballets,” *Hindu Wedding and Krishna and Rhada* [*sic*] that he choreographed for Pavlova (Khokar 1983, 27). A photograph of *Krishna and Rhada* [*sic*] from 1923 shows Shankar and Pavlova posing next to one another, Shankar as Krishna and Pavlova as Radha. In the photograph, Shankar as Krishna holds a flute with both elbows dropped, left foot crossed over right, and torso curved slightly to the right. Pavlova as Radha is sitting on the ground with her right knee up, looking away from Shankar. Shankar is attired in the male fashion of a tied *dhoti* (unstitched cloth) around the waist and Pavlova is wearing the female fashion of a *ghagra choli* (short top and long skirt) (Khokar 1983, 25). Shankar and Pavlova performed this piece on every stop of their North American tour and Khokar states that while the reviews from American dance critics of Pavlova’s Orientalist imaginings of India were mixed, as a white non-Indian woman, her embodiment of the Indian subject was acknowledged; whereas Shankar’s presence onstage as both an Indian male and as a dancer was not noticed or mentioned (1983, 27). Such critical neglect no doubt stemmed from views that Shankar was an authentic representation of Indian culture and Pavlova had to stretch beyond her ethnic position to represent an Indian dancer. Shankar’s role in *Krishna and Rhada* [*sic*] highlights issues of representation and authenticity through the issue of who is recognized as an acceptable representative of authentic Indian culture.

On the other hand, Indian dance practitioners, audiences, and critics later came to recognize Pavlova's role in helping spur the revival of classical dance in India. In a program for the "Classical Arts of India: A Renaissance" (1984) festival, in the section about Indian dance, the unnamed author wrote that in the 1920s, Anna Pavlova came to India with Uday Shankar and declared her desire to see India's ancient classical dances. During her Indian tours in 1925, Pavlova encouraged Rukmini Devi Arundale to learn Indian dancing (and then Arundale was credited along with Pavlova, St. Denis, and E. Krishna Iyer as reviving Bharata Natyam). Reynoso examines Pavlova's performances in Mexico City in 1919 and argues that Pavlova's performances "from her Europeanized repertoire as well as her balleticized rendition of Mexican folk dances helped create in Mexico City a social space in which Mexican elites could reaffirm their shared affinity with their cosmopolitan counterparts in the 'first world' while also attempting to retain their Mexican distinctiveness" (2014, 81). By performing "for the popular masses in places considered by Mexican socialites as of ill repute and engaging corporeally with people who performed in Mexico City by learning their dances," Pavlova engaged modernizing processes of selective re-choreographing through which "'low brow' cultural practices were 'elevated' to the realm of high art" (2014, 85). Drawing parallels between Pavlova's Mexico City performances and her India performances, Pavlova engaged modernizing processes that inspired the revival of classical Indian dance in India. More specifically, Pavlova's tours with Shankar (and her solo tours) catalyzed "processes of eliticization" in which the "combination of selective choreographic reconfigurations cultivates a body that appropriately portrays the identity of a refined, civilized modern subject" (2014, 90). The transformation of *sadir*, a solo style performed by *devadasis* who were pushed to the margins of social life in India in the late 19th century, to Bharata Natyam, a style revived by colonial-elites like Arundale and Iyer, represented

what Reynoso notes as a "successful eliticization" that produces the widest possible ideological and physical distance between the modernizing creators who consequently 'own' and commodify the eliticized dance and the culturally 'unsophisticated' bodies that originally produced it in its 'raw' form" (2014, 88). Pavlova's Indian performances (solo and with Shankar) accelerated space for upper caste practitioners to affirm their identities as cultural elites in India as they revived Bharata Natyam, that also enabled them to affirm their shared affinity with their first world counterparts while retaining this practice as distinctly Indian.

The reviews of Shankar's first US tour between 1932 and 1934 demonstrate how Shankar was implicated in Orientalist discourses as representing an authentic Indian context. Before discussing these reviews, it is important to discuss the transition for Shankar from dancer in Pavlova's company to solo artist. When he returned to London and began a solo career as a dancer, Shankar was still discovering what his style of dance was. For example, after his first solo performance in London, Shankar was quoted as saying, "I danced the Shiva without knowing anything about Shiva's dance. I just jumped around most probably. What I did, God knows" (Khokar 1983, 41). In London and Paris, Shankar mostly performed in cabarets and nightclubs and in Paris, where he met a piano player named Simone Barbier. Shankar initially hired Barbier as a pianist for the company, but she so enjoyed imitating Shankar's dancing that she became his dancing partner and Shankar gave her the name "Simkie" to appear more Indian to audiences. Before his first solo tour and second visit to the US, Shankar traveled back to India to learn more about the dance forms he was performing so that he could "offer Western audiences 'the real thing'" (Khokar 1983, 45). Shankar's popularity and work in London and Europe caught the interest of American impresario Sol Hurok, and Shankar's first American tour began on December 26, 1932 under Hurok's auspices (Khokar 1983, 67).

Shankar made his US debut at the 1932 International Dance Festival in New York City, NY. The festival was organized by Hurok and featured "Shankar and His Company of Hindu Dancers & Musicians" alongside "Mary Wigman and Her Group of Twelve Dancers" and "Escudero and His Ensemble" (International Dance Festival Program, 1932-1933). From December 25 to January 8, 1933, Shankar along with dancers Simkie, Kanak-Lata, Debendra, and Robindra, performed the following pieces: *Radha and Krishna*, *Ganga Puja*, *Dance of the Snake Charmer*, *Rama Chandra*, *Indra*, *Astra Puja*, *Peasant Dance*, *Kama Deva*, *Dance of the Hunter*, *Snanum*, *Devil Dance*, and *Tandava Nrittya*. These pieces would continue to be integral to Shankar's repertoire on his first US tour from 1932 to 1934. Shankar's first tour was popular and well received by US dance critics and audiences. For example, Edward Moore wrote a glowing review titled "Hindu Dancers Display Great Art of Orient: Shan-Kar and Group Make First Appearance" in which he stated that Shankar's work was "by far the most entertaining dance program of the season so far" (1933, 11). Moore continued that Shankar's work is a "wise and canny combination of the exotic of the east, and good showmanship, following a defined line, increasing in interest and developing a climax" and described in detail the movements of the dancers which he says is "no mere dance of the legs and feet, but dance of the arms, of the shoulders, of the wrists, fingers, neck, torso as well…they [the dancer's limbs] seemed all curves and no angles, more like swept in the current than human appendages" (1933, 11). In another glowing review, "The Dance: Hollis Street Theatre Uday Shan-Kar and His Hindu Dancers" the reviewer noted that the work was presented by "skilled exponents of a delicate and highly technical art, was something so strange and exquisite that even those to whom the traditions of Hindu dance are unknown were moved and thrilled" (*Boston Daily Globe* 1933). The reviewer continued that "Shan-Kar last night showed that he is a master of what is obviously an elaborate

and most exacting technique" and "his dances represent both the classic or sacred dances of India and the folk dances" (*Boston Daily Globe* 1933). These two reviews highlight the reception of Shankar's work within Orientalist discourses as dance critics characterized his dances as strange and exotic.

Key words that highlight Shankar's appeal to these audiences and critics are: exquisite, strange, and exotic. These words characterize what I discussed earlier in both O'Shea's and Srinivasan's texts on the Western fascination with the "East" and how these words contributed to the Orientalist framing of dance forms and practitioners who are Othered. These practitioners are unable to escape the Orientalist perception of representing to ancient traditions and spiritual knowledge. While these reviews demonstrate how critics restricted Shankar's artistry within US Orientalist discourses, Shankar himself also contributed to these discourses.

While these reviews demonstrate how critics restricted Shankar's artistry within US Orientalist discourses, Shankar himself also contributed to these discourses. In an interview with Barbara Blake in *The Atlanta Constitution* from January 14, 1934 titled "The Technique of Hindu Dances Told by Shan-Kar, Here for Program," Shankar talks about the technique he uses which are "thousands of years old, difficult, takes at least 11 or 12 years of hard work to learn, and that each movement is symbolic and cannot be changed" (Blake 1934, 4A). In the interview, Shankar also mentions that Simkie is now "greater than any of the dancing girls of India" (Blake 1934, 4A), contributing to discourse of Orientalism where Simkie can embody Indian subjectivities better than any Indian female dancers from India, further excluding Indian female bodies from these representations.

While Shankar both played into and was received as representing an "authentic" Indian, American dance critics' recognition of Shankar's positionality as an upper caste male enabled

him to be successful at a time when South Asians were not granted citizenship in the US. In *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism*, Prarthana Purkayastha highlights how Shankar contributed to these discourses by stating that he "made use of his identity as an 'authentic' Indian, playing on his foreignness and his exclusivity as a dancer from the Orient" (Purkayastha 2014, 52). Shankar's status as an upper caste Brahmin is noted in some US reviews written on his work. In the review noted above, Blake wrote that Shankar is a "handsome young Brahmin" (Blake 1934, 4A). Edward Moore in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted that "Shankar himself is a high caste Brahmin" (Moore 1933, 11). The recognition of Shankar as upper caste male is coupled with a recognition of his status as "internationalized-cosmopolitan artist," meaning that he constructed a local identity at the same time develop artistic practices with a universal reach to appeal to the, in Reynoso's terms, "civilized first world" (Reynoso 2014, 81). Shankar's elitist status can be framed within the articulation of the "internationalized-cosmopolitan artist," through his construction of authentic Indian identity with a universal reach, that was recognized by American dance critics and this recognition made him a popular Indian dance practitioners on American concert stages.

In a 1933 review published in the *Boston Daily Globe*, the unnamed author wrote that "by his recreations of the ancient dances of India, whether they are in fact authentically Hindu, or whether, as seems more probable, they are influenced by his association with the West and with Pavlova, "he has given Europe and America a clearer understanding and a deeper appreciation of all Hindu Art" (*Boston Daily Globe* 1933). Another review states that Shan-Kar's Hindu Ballet is successful with Western audiences partially because of his knowledge of the world outside of India. Shankar's ability to represent both an "authentic" Indian context and an "internationalized-cosmopolitan" context is what enabled Shankar to "achieve a fine balance between the

translation of Indian narratives on the one hand and interpretation of such narratives for a western audience on the other" (Purkayastha 2014, 51). The recognition of Shankar as an internationalized-cosmopolitan artist is framed by the ways Shankar both contributed to and was framed by Orientalist discourses. Within these discourses, which framed Shankar and his work as both authentically Indian and cosmopolitan, American dance critics developed a language through which to read and articulate aspects of classical Indian dance, which was undergoing a revival at the same time Shankar was touring the US.

Indian dance critics in India wrote about Shankar's ability to interpret what they valued an authentic Indian context differently as his work aligned with the revival of Bharata Natyam as classical dance form in 1932 in India. Khokar notes this alignment in the Indian critics' reviews of Shankar's work. He highlights that in North India, where Shankar was from, Shankar's work was generously received but in South India, "Shankar did not prove to be an instant hit" because the South was possessive of its own dance traditions and did not accept something as different and unconventional (Khokar 1983, 79). The differences between North and South Indian critics and audiences' reception of Shankar's work has to do with the classical Indian dance revival starting in South India (beginning with Bharata Natyam) and Shankar's association with the West. Khokar's text includes letters from E. Krishna Iyer, one of the central figures in the revival of Bharata Natyam, and critic, Mr. Seshagiri, who both wrote that Shankar's work could not be considered classical. Mr. Seshagiri's letter ended up being sent to Martin who wrote an article in *The New York Times* titled "The Dance: Art of India: Shan-Kar Criticized as Departing From Canons of the Indian Classical Dance," published February 2, 1934, based on Mr. Seshagiri's argument that what Shankar was doing should not be considered anywhere near representative of traditional, classical Indian dance and Shankar's response to Seshagiri was that what he was

doing was evolving the practice, so that the tradition doesn't remain stagnant (Khokar 1983, 78). This argument as addressed by Martin positions Shankar as an artist working outside the canon of classical Indian dance, yet Martin doesn't label Shankar as a "modern" dancer (Khokar 1983, 78). Purkayastha analyzed Shankar's position outside the classical Indian dance hegemony, to understand how Shankar's position as an internationalized-cosmopolitan artist through his travels between Euro-American and Asian worlds, positioned him as an outsider to two worlds (2014, 58). Purkayastha states that Shankar occupied a space that nowadays is often associated with the diaspora, in which his "…dancing body negotiated local and translocal identities even as long ago as the 1930s (2014, 58). When re-read in the context of Purkayastha's analysis, Martin's article positions Shankar as an outsider as Martin outlined the parameters of modern dance alongside the revival of classical Indian dance in the 1930s. While Shankar's career was shaped by Orientalist discourses to access the mystique and exotic nature of India, Shankar himself as an "internationalized-cosmopolitan artist," also shaped these Orientalist discourses as aligned with whiteness of the universal subject.

In 1938, Shankar returned to India to establish the Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre. In a 1937 review of Shankar's performance, Martin wrote that Shankar's aim for returning and settling in India was to open a school "'for the study of the [then-labeled] Hindu dance, music, and mythology' – which are, of course, inseparable – 'and a research department which will preserve in permanent archives authentic materials of the ancient Hindu dance as well as its current folk expressions'" (Martin 1937). Shankar's 1937–1938 tour was meant to be his final world tour, however in 1948 he returned to the US to premiere his film, *Kalpana.* In an excerpt from the film, Shankar and his dancers advance through the space in a series of slow and sweeping arm and torso rotations. The piece evokes a meditative quality as Shankar and the

dancers at one point gradually shift towards the floor, bending one knee, their other legs outstretched, and their palms meeting in front of their chest with eyes closed. At a couple points in the brief clip, Shankar's eyes are wide as he holds a focused expression. Shankar's style appears to be a blend of Kathakali and Odissi styles, evident in the sweeping and fluid shifts in the torso and the wide half-seated position. The musical accompaniment incorporates Balinese *gamelan* along with *Hindustani* musical instruments (Shankar 1948). In *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentations*, dance theorist Urmimala Sarkar Munsi notes that Shankar's musical accompaniment carried a strong reference to the East that sometimes "included musical instruments such as gongs and gamelans for beyond the borders of South Asia" to create a bridge between the dancers and audiences around the world (2022, 98). Sarkar Munsi further argues that including musical instruments from outside of South Asia cemented his role as a representative of the "East." This visit re-launched his second US tour, which began in 1950.

Reviews during his 1950–1952 US tour highlighted Shankar's profile as an exponent of "Hindu" dance. These reviews would continue to highlight the shifting status of classical Indian dances and Shankar's role in reviving and performing these styles for US audiences. In a review published January 12, 1952 in the *Boston Daily Globe* titled "Shankar's Hindu Ballet Delights Huge Audience at Symphony Hall," author K.S. Bartlett writes:

> His own dances last night were pretty much on the traditional pattern of the Hindu dance, one of the most highly developed of all Oriental dance forms. Those he composed for the rest of the company show that, in India as elsewhere, ancient patterns are shifting. (Bartlett 1952)

When Shankar returned for his third US tour in the 1960s, critics noted that he was not the same dancer (aside from the fact that he was thirty years older). In a review published November 3, 1962 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "On the Aisle: Mortal Reminders of Shankar, Long the Demigod of Hindu Dance," author Claudia Cassidy writes that "even 10 years ago he struck the old spell like a reverberant gong. Now he teaches and it is not quite the same Shankar who has returned with 'the charming Amala' his wife and partner, their young troupe, and another set of musicians" (Cassidy 1962). Some of the reasons Cassidy lists is that Shankar is "is heavier today, the lightning flash movement has slowed down, and the strength has waned, but the chief difference is one of point of view. He is no longer the godlike figure set apart, but a member of the wedding" (Cassidy 1962). Cassidy's review highlighted Shankar's older age and his inability to execute some of the movements he could do as a younger dancer as reasons for no longer being a godlike figure of dance. Cassidy's review also points to Shankar's waning popularity in the post-independence era both in India and internationally as dance critics in the US and India were writing about what constitutes traditional, classical Indian dance. In *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema*, Usha Iyer examines Shankar's waning popularity in India, noting that he was criticized by classical dance practitioners for "presenting Oriental dance from Europe, not quite Indian and certainly not authentic" (2020, 149). Shankar's dance rendered as inauthentic was further cemented by his exclusion from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, which defined authenticity more rigidly and "Shankar's departure from recognized traditions was considered antithetical to the promotion of Indian traditional arts" (Iyer 2020, 149). Shankar's last American tour and his exclusion from the "official narrative of Indian culture (2020, 150), underscores shifting constructions of cultural heritage to fit changing

discourses of national modernity from the 1930s into the 1950s and 1960s (Iyer 2020, 149). The canonization of classical Indian dance forms rendered Shankar's dance as inauthentic.

Ram Gopal (1912-2003)

Ram Gopal's US tours also popularized classical Indian dance in the US. In 1935, Bissano Ram Gopal, known professionally as Ram Gopal, began his international touring career during the early years of the Bharata Natyam revival. Gopal brought classical Indian dance to the international dance sphere as his concerts deployed the movement vocabulary and the repertoire of Bharata Natyam and other classical forms. Gopal was invited to the United States by La Meri, an American dancer and choreographer who specialized in "ethnologic dance" to tour with her through Asia and the US in the 1930s. Dance critic Walter Terry defined the then-called ethnologic as movement forms that "mirror similarities and differences which distinguish eras, races, nations and regions" (Kowal 2019, 6). Ethnologic dance at the time was a label critics like Terry gave to white practitioners performing non-Western forms. On May 2, 1938, Gopal made his US debut at the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre in New York, NY. In a review published in the *New York Times*, Martin described Gopal as "a youthful Hindu dancer… he is a slender, pictorial young man who does not look twenty-two years accredited to him; and, truth to tell, his dancing is at present equally slender, equally young and equally pictorial" (Martin 1938). Martin continued:

> As yet he has not made himself master of great subtlety which lies in the technique of the Hindu dance, and he has used it more for its surface qualities than anything else. He is certainly not without technical knowledge and skill, however, to be employed more

> substantially when his approach to his art matures. Similarly, there will develop then, no doubt, a fuller sense of the richness and profundity which belong to his ancient and deeply rooted dance. (Martin 1938)

Martin's review of Gopal's debut performance frames Gopal within Martin's understanding of Indian dance as ancient and subtle in technique. While Gopal is praised as a gifted performer, his technique was critiqued as lacking subtlety, providing a window in the ways US dance critics assessed his work based on their understanding of the emerging classical Indian dance styles. In *Dancing the World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America*, Rebekah Kowal writes about the US reception of Gopal's performances ten years later at the 1948 International Dance Festival. The festival was organized by Hurok, who invited countries to send their representative dance companies. The goal of the festival was to assemble a program of performances that could showcase dancers from disparate reaches of the globe and represent the cultures and traditions of their respective countries. This festival was organized to highlight New York City as a "global city" (Kowal 2019, 168). The event took place in September and October of 1948. Of the fourteen countries invited only three sent representative groups, including the Paris Opera Ballet (France), Ram Gopal and Dancers (India), and Charles Weidman (United States). Ram Gopal and the Hindu Ballet Company's performance at the International Dance Festival was geared towards "promoting the values of global cosmopolitanism," yet as Kowal argues, the festival came off as a feeble "internationalist gesture" (2019, 174). Despite the shortcomings of the 1948 International Dance Festival, Gopal's contemporary staging of classical choreography was well received. This festival was one of many venues that provided an opportunity for Ram Gopal to establish the presence of classical Indian dance in the US.

Gopal's aim as a dancer and choreographer was to spread international understanding in teaching Americans about India. Gopal considered himself a true representative of India whose "burning desire to resuscitate the genuine and classical South Indian dances and present them artistically where they had been debased of all their authentic charm and vigor by indifferent dancers…led him to devote all his powers and skill to this task" (Kowal 2019, 176). Gopal's vision of his dance practices as forging connections between the East and the West was fundamentally intercultural. To define interculturalism, I bring in Royona Mitra's work on dancer Akram Khan. Mitra defines interculturalism as a "conceptual, processual, embodied lived condition driven by one's own multiple affiliations to cultures, nations, and faiths" (2015, 15). Mitra's definition highlights how the term was used to describe the work of white theater practitioners in Britain making Orientalist theatrical works. Therefore, Khan's work represents a new interculturalism that conveys "the intersection of his two mutually linked embodied realities: his political and philosophical negotiations of multiple identity-positions" (Mitra 2015, 10). Mitra's definition is useful for positioning Gopal's identity as he attempted to forge connections between the East and West. Kowal argues that Gopal's "advocation of his interculturalism however seems to have had little impact on his reception by US critics, who downplayed the ambassadorial aspects of his performances and focused instead on the extent to which his work met their aesthetic expectations" (2019, 178). This was indicative of Mitra's point that the term was used to describe white practitioners' Orientalist works. Kowal further explains that this was due to the fact that critics would compare Gopal's work to Shankar's. For example, Martin evaluated Gopal's work against his own assumptions about what classical Indian dance should look like; this was based on his experience of Shankar's past performances. Indian critics also questioned the "Indianness" of Gopal's work compared to dance practices

emerging from the revival of classical Indian dance in the 1940s (Kowal 2019, 188). In an excerpt from a silent 1947 film, Gopal stands in a museum gallery with his arms bent above his head, eyes closed. Gopal's interculturalism is demonstrated through the way his hands rotate slowly at the wrists as his hands drift down towards his chest. Gopal's slow, twirling wrists and finger isolations evoke Southeast Asian influences. He then strolls to the right and left, his right arm dangling, relaxed, by his side. He remains in a standing pose for most of the clip even when he executes a series of Bharata Natyam *adavus* (British Pathé 2014). Gopal and Shankar were aware of their identities in a pan-Asian sense and understood the dynamics of the Eastern body and, thus looked towards the multiple dance forms of Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Ceylon for their movement genres, dresses, and presentation techniques for use in Indian dance (Sarkar Munsi 2022, 108). Gopal's work demonstrated interculturalism through his identity as a dancer from India working and performing in the US, yet his interculturalism was not recognized amidst the growing aesthetic parameters of classical Indian dance.

Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury (1930-2003)

As Indian dance practitioners standardized classical dance forms in India and performed regularly on American stages, more Indian practitioners traveled to the US to establish and popularize these dance forms in venues beyond concert stages like nightclubs and film. Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, known professionally as Bhaskar, was an Indian dancer, choreographer, actor, and painter who introduced more American audiences to classical dances between 1950 and 1970. Born to a famous painter and sculptor, D.P. Roy Chowdhury, Chowdhury began his career as a boxer, then as an actor, starring in an Indian version of the film *Tarzan*, titled *Varzan* (in which he played the lead role, Varzan). This role inspired him to learn Bharata Natyam, Kathak,

Kathakali, and Manipuri. As a dancer and choreographer in India, Chowdhury was known for choreographing Hindu dances to Western themes. His choreography earned him recognition in India. For example, in 1952, he was the only Hindu dancer to be selected to perform at the Colombo Exhibition in present-day Sri Lanka and he was also honored by then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for outstanding contributions to the Indian traditional arts. His choreography in India influenced his approach to showcasing classical Indian in the US.

Bhaskar's impact as an Indian dancer in the US began when he moved to the US in 1955 to appear in the TV production *Marco Polo*. In 1956, Bhaskar formed his first all-American Hindu dance troupe. In a quote from a magazine article titled "Bhaskar, The Body From Madras," Bhaskar stated that when he wanted to form his company, he discovered there were about 70 people doing Indian dance in the city and that they were not Indians. He then stated that he "never had an Indian in [his] company…and [he] never will. They just won't work, won't take the discipline" (Pikula, n.d.). That Bhaskar could not find Indians doing Indian dance in New York City was indicative of the immigration landscape in the 1950s. In 1946, President Harry S. Truman signed the Luce-Celler Act which provided naturalization rights to both South Asians and Filipinos, but still limited the number of migrants allowed into the country (SAADA, n.d.). Bhaskar's comments that Indians will not work or do not have discipline also reinforce a similar position to Shankar's earlier comments on Simkie. These comments emphasized the Orientalist discourse that Westerners can embody Indian subjectivities better than Indian dancers, further excluding Indian bodies from these representations. Bhaskar's comments also highlight the continued fascination with Indian dancing among Americans who at that point were students of performers American audiences were familiar with like Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, and Ram Gopal, to name a few.

When Bhaskar first started performing in the US, reviews often compared him to Shankar and Gopal. In a newspaper article titled "Dance in New York," R. Hasoutra wrote that Chowdhury studied with the same teacher as Shankar and Gopal (Ellappa Pillai, a renowned Bharata Natyam teacher). Hasoutra was interested in watching Bhaskar's debut because he saw Shankar's first performance in Paris and, much later, Gopal's first appearance in London. Of Bhaskar's dancing, he observed that "he has little of the young Shankar's inner sensitivity, but he is well along the path of Ram Gopal without, however, the scope, polish and attention to detail which Gopal had, even at his debut" (1957). The review ended with some encouragement that Bhaskar will make it if he can get good artistic direction in refining and perfecting the details without losing his overall sense of theater. Another reviewer in a different publication wrote that "Shan-Kar was the great exponent of his exotic medium, and I would not more have missed one of his recitals than I would have breakfast…," yet the author was not impressed with Bhaskar's dancing, in which he stated that "all this oriental neck stretch, stomping and rippling of the arms no longer excites me artistically" (*Winsor French* 1956). Walter Terry's review, "The Sultan (King) Who Became A Dancer," also compared Chowdhury, Gopal, and Shankar. He wrote:

> Some American dance fans, accustomed to the more subtle dance ways of Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and other Indian dance classicists, have looked somewhat askance at what they consider "show biz" liberties in the form of backbends, in which Bhaskar touches the back and of his head with a foot, or in the violently rippling arms in the cobra dance. But Bhaskar, as scholarly as he is intensely theatrical, points to the thousands of ancient carvings on many of his country's temples and says, "These are the enduring

> records of our classical dances." And the viewer will see in them elegant acrobatics and a multiplicity of refined contortions. (Terry 1956)

Bhaskar's more "theatrical" style in comparison to Shankar and Gopal's more subtle presentations of Indian dance drew critiques since the first time he performed in the US. Bhaskar's methods for incorporating "flashier elements" did not align with the perceived subtleness or spirituality that American dance critics and audiences were expecting in their Orientalist viewing of classical Indian dance performances. This point is underscored by dance critic Jennie Schulman's review, who stated that "his company is a hybrid one and the direction of it is quite tasteless." She continued, "the costumes are all glitter and glare rather than the subdued appearance of the Hindu legends that are so overwhelming a part of the poetic dance…and that the emphasis on the tinselish is quite a distraction throughout the program" (1956). Schulman's review reinforces the stereotype of Indian dance should be subdued because it is ancient; any deviation from this is problematically viewed as "tasteless." Terry and Schulman's reviews present a contradiction between how Indian and US dance critics viewed Indian dance. In India, Bhaskar was accepted as a classical Indian practitioner in India even as he choreographed classical Indian dance to Western themes (this was evidenced in the accolades he received as a performer in India). Shankar in particular was not accepted as an Indian dance practitioner by Indian dance critics even if his later productions included more classical Indian dance vocabulary from Odissi and Kathakali. While American expectations for viewing Indian dances were changing in alignment with the growing knowledge of what were considered authentic classical Indian dance forms from India, ultimately their assessment that Bhaskar's presentations were not as subdued and subtle as Shankar and Gopal's presentations, even as all

three performers mixed different styles and cultural influences in their choreography, are steeped in an Orientalist expectation that Indian dance forms are subtle because of their perceived ancient nature and spirituality.

In the late 1950s, reviews noted that Bhaskar's style would become more refined as he lessened the number of acrobatic movements to capture some of the "beauty of the dances of India" (1959). A letter written in 1996 by Shala, one of the dancers in his company, stated that Bhaskar's ideas about the presentation of Indian dance were met with controversy among certain critics as he believed that the classical dances of India would be even more appreciated if they were presented in an entertaining and theatrical manner. While the special lighting effects, variances on costume design and the incorporation of spectacular head-dresses continuously delighted audiences, these elements, she noted, appalled purists. She recalled that he was often heard saying "I give my audiences the entertainment they want while educating them at the same time" (Shala 1996). The flashier, theatrical elements of Bhaskar's dancing also led to the fusion of the different classical dance styles he was trained in, leading critics to call his work "Bhaskar Natyam."

Bhaskar's blending of Western and classical Indian dance aesthetics to produce a more theatrical style opened up more performance spaces for him like nightclubs, television appearances on the *Today Show* and *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, and shows (he performed solo at Radio City Music Hall, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Jacob's Pillow). He choreographed and performed in Broadway shows from 1960 to 1964. In 1961, Bhaskar choreographed and performed, along with his company dancers Dinu and Anjali Devi, in a short film directed by Ismail Merchant and James Ivory titled *Creation of Woman* (1961). With narration by actor Saeed Jaffrey, Chowdhury played Brahma. Chowdhury wore gold, skin-tight

shorts, and an elaborate gold headpiece (resembling a lion's mane). For the majority of the film, Chowdhury remained seated with his eyes closed in meditation. When he came out of his performed meditation, Bhaskar conveyed the presence of Brahma as a god-like figure through slow and heavy lunges and soft torso shifts. The blending of Western and classical Indian dance aesthetics is evident in the way the dancers Dinu and Anjali perform elaborate Bharata Natyam *adavus* that require them to quickly jump up and down on the balls of their feet with a softness in their hands and fingers. The dancers don't sit in the full *aramandi* or hold a complete *natyaarambai* (position of the arms) in the same way that is expected of Bharata Natyam dancers today (Bhaskar 1961). This short film was nominated for an Academy Award in 1962, further bringing international acclaim to Bhaskar and his company, in addition to introducing more people to Bharata Natyam as it was developing in the US.

Bhaskar's positionality influenced his teaching and performance of classical Indian dance forms in the US. In the early 1960s, Bhaskar became a naturalized US citizen. His identity as an Indian-American was highlighted in a program for a performance in 1976. The author of Bhaskar's biography in the program wrote:

> That no one in the world deserves more or would enjoy more – the biographical title, "A Yankee Hindu," than Bhaskar. Although he was born, raised and educated in India, he has embraced the United States of America as his home. Further, he is internationally acclaimed as one of the greatest contemporary proponents of classical Hindu dance in the world. He is a true son of the East, however, Bhaskar's assimilation of the West is startingly obvious in his most recent works which blend classical Hindu movements with

Modern Dance movements. ("An Evening of Classical Indian Dances" Program - Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury Papers)

Bhaskar would continue to perform and tour his hybrid works into the 1970s, where he performed more at middle and high schools across the US. Along with Bhaskar, more dancers trained in different classical dance forms would also tour the US starting in the 60s.

"Authenticity" and "Tradition:" Indrani Rahman and Shanta Rao on Tour in the 1960s

As Shankar, Gopal, and Bhaskar's tours continued into the 1960s, more classical Indian dancers came to the US to perform. An organization that featured a large number of performances and sponsored US tours of Indian artists was The Asia Society. The Asia Society was founded by American philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III in 1956 as a nonprofit and nonpartisan educational institution. The institution's purpose was to increase American understanding and appreciation of Asia to foster greater cooperation between Asia and the US. In 1960, the Performing Arts Program of the Asia Society was established in the belief that an understanding of the rich cultural heritage of Asia could add a significant dimension to the education and enjoyment of every American. Specifically, the Performing Arts Program was established to increase awareness and appreciation of Asian dance, music, theatre arts, and craft arts in the US, that could aid in building cooperation between Asia and the US. The inaugural Performing Arts Program included a national touring engagement with Ravi Shankar, a popular sitarist, composer, and younger brother to Uday Shankar. Ravi Shankar had already performed in the US as a dancer in Uday Shankar's company. The Asia Society used to house an accessible repository of Asian performing arts records, films, video cassettes, photographs, and

monographs. Featured in this repository was Yamini Krishnamurthy, an exponent of Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi, and Birju Maharaj, and a renowned exponent of Kathak, alongside his company South Indian Dance. Not only could patrons purchase these films, but the Asia Society would also sometimes broadcast these performances (Asia Society, n.d.), thus further popularizing classical Indian dances through different mediums.

In the next section, I examine the work of dancers Indrani Rahman and Shanta Rao in the late 1950s/early 1960s and how their tours continued to educate US audiences on the different classical Indian dance styles that would further establish these forms on US concert stages.

Indrani Rahman (1930-1999)

Another featured artist of the inaugural Performing Arts Program from 1961–62 season was dancer and choreographer Indrani Rahman, professionally known as Indrani. Indrani was Ragini Devi's daughter (whose work was discussed earlier in the chapter). Indrani was first exposed to Indian dance through her mother at young age. However, her classical Indian dance training began in 1946, when she studied Bharata Natyam under Pandanallur Chokkalingam Pillai. Indrani's performances were well received when she began performing in the US. Walter Terry wrote that "Indrani makes clear that her range of dance action, of gesture, and of mood is quite the most extensive that a female dancer from India has disclosed to American audiences" (1978). Terry's quote makes evident Indrani's training and expertise in multiple classical Indian dance forms. Her training across different classical Indian dance disciplines made her an authentic representative of classical Indian dance broadly according to American and Indian

dance critics as American audiences learned more about her role in reviving[11] the "lost forms" of Odissi (called Orissi when it was first written about on her tours in 1962) and Mohini Attam. Her promotional materials emphasized that in reviving Mohini Attam and Odissi that up until 1950 were banned, she followed in her mother's footsteps (Indian and American dance critics gave Ragini Devi credit for rescuing and reviving Kathakali). Indrani introduced American audiences to the isolated torso shifts in Odissi and the continuous flow of grounded spirals in Manipuri and her Odissi, Manipuri, and Bharata Natyam performances on American concert stages reinforced the Asia Society's mission to increase awareness and appreciation of authentic Asian arts to build cooperation between the US and Asia.

Indrani's performances emphasized the distinctions between the different classical Indian styles. A souvenir pamphlet published by the Asia Society provided an explanation of the four main styles of classical dance as they were defined then: Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali, and Manipuri. In Indrani's publicity materials (through Asia Society and outside of it), Bharata Natyam was described as a solo feminine dance form that has been nurtured in the temples over centuries and as a complex dance style which attained its present form about one hundred and fifty years ago. Indrani's description of Bharata Natyam as a feminine solo form directly connected the practice to *sadir*, which is in contrast to other publication materials from other artists who connected Bharata Natyam to the *Natya Sastra*. The Asia Society continued to sponsor Indrani in touring the US through the 1970 and 1980, when she often performed with her daughter, Sukanya. Indrani's role in popularizing classical dance forms was furthered by the teaching positions she held at Juilliard, Harvard, SUNY at Purchase Brooklyn College, Jacob's

[11] As discussed earlier in the chapter, the process of reviving classical dance forms appropriated hereditary dancers' practices and in doing so, marginalized and erased hereditary dancers from the histories of these styles.

Pillow Dance Festival and New York University. Indrani's role as a classical Indian dance representative highlighted her family history in reviving classical dance forms, furthering the Orientalist discourse on the process of rescuing Indian dances from marginalized communities to make them acceptable on concert stages in India and the US.

Shanta Rao (1930-2007)

In 1963, the Asia Society also sponsored Shanta Rao's US tours. Rao's first US tour and Broadway engagement was in 1957. The program for her first show at Broadway's Anta Theatre on September 29, 1957, described Rao as a "a zealot and a purist," who through hard discipline preserved the different classical styles in which she was trained. Born in Mangalore, India, to wealth, comfort, and a conservative life, Rao began her pursuit of learning dance "following a period of prejudice against professional dancers from upper-class families" (Playbill - "Dancers of India," 1957). Rao's positionality in coming from an upper caste family is highlighted in many promotional materials. Underscoring her positionality helped to circulate the narrative that she represented the revival in the arts of India and that she studied from great teachers who still maintained the traditional practice and did not pander to Western audiences or films (Playbill - "Dancers of India," 1957). Framing herself as an authentic and traditional practitioner of classical dance also established her position within the Indian nationalist movement that revived classical dance forms, especially as she wrote of her own role in "saving" Mohini Attam as it was about to vanish from memory (Playbill - "Dancers of India," 1957). Rao's role as a preserver of classical Indian dance fits within the early aims of the Asia Society that curated programs on the basis of preserving traditional forms.

In her promotional materials, Rao's study of classical Indian dance is also curiously compared to the study of Western dance. This comparison gives classical Indian dancers more support from concert organizers and patrons to feature these styles on American stages. The author of a biography written for Rao's Broadway performance playbill, wrote that when she was performing in London, she was asked to compare Western ballet with the "spirituality" of Indian dance. Her response was, "I am bereft of spirituality. I only know work and sweat!" The fact that her day began at 5:30am was also highlighted in this program (and other programs), as is the fact that "she speaks quietly and, when required, her English is impeccable" (Playbill - "Dancers of India," 1957). In a *Dance Magazine* review, the author wrote:

> Classical Indian dancing is much concerned with mythology: but there is one myth associated with it which has done this great art a lot of harm. This is the belief – all too powerful in the West- that Indian classical dancing is so esoteric and mysterious that the spectator cannot enjoy it unless he has spent years studying its MUDRAS (symbolic gestures) and its background in Hindu religion. "This myth is very effectively exploded by Shanta, the beauteous Indian dancer, whose first two recitals west of Bombay, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, April 26 and 27, were events of major artistic importance" (Brochure – Shanta Rao: India's Premier Danseuse, 1963)

Other reviews described Rao as the "greatest classical dancer of India," a claim which could hardly be disputed by an outsider. Another reviewer wrote, "by mental comparison with such prizable performers as Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal (also their female associates), Miss Rao's discipline, grace and rhythmic feeling were plainly of a superior sort" (Brochure – Shanta Rao:

India's Premier Danseuse, 1963). Rao's US tours marked her role as an authentic representative of India's classical dances. This role was implicated in US Orientalist discourses that marked her Westernized (in the ways she spoke impeccable English or was disciplined in her practice). Rao was highlighted as an assimilated yet authentic dancer as she was celebrated as famous dancer in India and the US.

Both Indrani and Rao's initial US tours took place just a few years before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that abolished immigration quotas based on national origin and led to an increase of migrants from South Asia. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 altered the immigration landscape for South Asians, and many Asian professionals were able to enter the United States for the first time and apply for citizenship (SAADA, n.d.). After 1965, the wives of Indian male professionals established Bharata Natyam schools. These wives were trained dancers from India and because their non-citizenship status hindered their work opportunities upon their immediate arrival to the US, they set up dance schools in several US cities (Srinivasan 2012, 26). The emergence of more classical Indian dance practitioners would shift the Indian dance aesthetics established by the dancers discussed in this chapter, as Indian dance instruction after 1965 refined cultural and physical training that stressed spirituality, precise gestures, and complex rhythms. This instruction enabled children in America to stay connected to their parents' heritage and traditions. The circulation of classical Indian dances after 1965 reinforced the narrative that these forms are important for second-generation Indian Americans to study to maintain their Indianness.

In the 1960s, Indian spirituality in the US continued to grow through the popularity of yoga. Americans' reception of yoga along with the Indian arts reinforced the ways US Orientalism constructs India as the domain of spirituality that is seen as the answer to "the crisis

of stagflation and social discontent" (Prashad 2000, 51). The popularity of Indian music and dance that grew through Ravi Shankar's collaborations with jazz musician John Coltrane and The Beatles' member George Harrison was reflected in some of the reviews of Bhaskar's work in the 1960s. A review in a campus newspaper, *The Southwester*, highlighted that "with the current rage for ragas, Ravi Shankar, and Indian culture in general spreading on our campus, there should be a knowledgeable crowd of students on hand for Bhaskar" (Phelps 1967). The review also highlighted the conflation of Indian spirituality with experiments with psychedelic drugs, stating that "the two will present local aficionadas with a fine opportunity for a freak-out, simulated of course, in view of the present area shortage of LSD" (Phelps 1967). Prashad notes that psychedelic drug experimentations within the context of Indian spiritual movements in the US was a "scream of longing for what a consumer culture cannot provide – a community of love and the capacity to experience things intensely" (2000, 51). Bhaskar's, Indrani's, and Rao's US tours in the 1960s (and their continued tours through the 1970s and 1980s) reflected the demand for Indian spirituality as an antidote to an industrial-consumer society as they presented authentic classical Indian dances steeped in tradition. Their tours also reflect the increased presence of South Asians in the US who sought to uphold classical dance as site of revered tradition and authentic identity in teaching subsequent generations the importance of staying connected to India.

The Emergence of Classical Indian Dance Festivals: Changes from the Early Twentieth to Early Twenty-First Centuries

Since the 1930s, festivals in the US focused on presenting dance styles labeled as "international" and "ethnic" have played an important role in introducing American audiences to

classical Indian dance forms. Since Shankar's US debut performance at the 1932 International Dance Festival in New York City, Indian dance practitioners have performed regularly at varying annual (or one-time) American dance festivals. American-born artist Gina Blau, known professionally as Srimathi Gina, performed Bharata Natyam at the Association Members of the New School for Social Research's 1947 International Dance Festival in New York City (Program – International Dance Festival 1947). The following year, Ram Gopal performed Bharata Natyam and Kathakali at the 1948 International Dance Festival also in New York City, but hosted by the Mayor's Committee in connection with the city's Golden Jubilee (Kowal 2019, 2). In 1954, Gopal was also featured as a teacher and performer at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Massachusetts. Ted Shawn, an American dancer and choreographer who first co-founded the Denishawn Company in 1914 with Ruth St. Denis, and later Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers, started Jacob's Pillow Festival in 1931 (Jacob's Pillow, n.d.). Indrani made her debut at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in 1960 and would continue to perform there until her final performance there in 1979. Bhaskar was a regular performer at the Summer of Ethnic Arts Festival in Barnstable, Massachusetts (Program – A Summer Festival of Ethnic Dance 1975). Bhaskar's classical Indian dance performance was featured alongside Japanese classical dance and Ukrainian folk dance, to name a couple. La Meri, herself a Bharata Natyam practitioner (having studied the newly transformed *sadir* as Bharata Natyam in Madras in 1937), started Summer of Ethnic Arts Festival in 1969. In 1978, the World Arts West organization established the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival which features classical Indian dance prominently. Throughout the 20th century, international and ethnic dance festivals were platforms for Indian dance practitioners from India and the US to introduce audiences to the emerging classical Indian dance forms.

Indian dance performances at these festivals also increasingly reinforced classical Indian dance's status as traditional and authentic in America especially as these forms were consolidated under the label of "ethnic dance." Under the category "ethnic," dance is seen "as local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative, simple rather than sophisticated, a product of the people rather than a genius" (Foster 2009, 2). As Srinivasan notes, Shawn's labeling of dance forms at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival under the distinct categories of "modern," and "traditional/ethnic" placed them in opposition to one another as modern dance was seen as "new" and traditional/ethnic as "old, different and foreign." These distinctions served to hide the ways modern dance practitioners in America borrowed from "old" Asian practices to form their American identity through inventing "new" practices (Srinivasan 2011, 114). While ethnic dance festivals provide performance opportunities for Indian dance practitioners to introduce American audiences to classical Indian dance forms, these festivals frame classical dance practices as different, traditional, and authentic, thus keeping these styles and Indian dance practitioners outside the fictive boundaries of American dance. Since 1978, classical Indian dance festivals emerged in tandem with the growing South Asian population in the US and the continued presence of classical Indian dance at international and ethnic dance festivals across American cities. In 1981, Battery Dance in New York City started the Downtown Dance Festival, the longest-running free dance festival in New York City (Battery Dance, n.d.). In 2008, the Indo-American Arts Council established the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance Festival within the Downtown Dance Festival (and would later be called the Battery Park Festival) as a single-day lineup of Indian dance and music performances. This one day of Indian dance and music performances aligns with India's Independence Day on August 15th. While the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance Festival has expanded to a multi-day festival, it still plays a role

in curating performances for the Battery Park Festival. Between 2008 and 2012, there was a high volume of classical Indian dance and music festivals emerging in different American cities. In 2010, Kathak teacher and choreographer Chitresh Das established an eight-day classical Indian dance and music festival, Traditions Engaged Festival, in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The excitement around this festival led to then mayor of San Francisco, Gavin Newsom, proclaiming the start date of the festival, October 1, 2010, as "Indian Classical Dance and Music Dance Day" (The Asia Society, n.d.) In 2011, the Maximum India festival was held in Washington D.C., as a three-week celebration of India. The festival featured dance performances amongst culinary, art, film, and music offerings (Ramanthan 2011). In the 2011, the World Music Institute introduced the annual Dancing the Gods Indian Classical Dance Festival, which features dancers and choreographers across Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, and Odissi (World Music Institute, n.d.). In 2012, a New York-based classical Indian arts organization, Navatman, began the Drive East Festival. While the Traditions Engaged and Maximum India were one-time festivals, the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance, Dancing the Gods, and Drive East Festivals continue to be central platforms for American audiences to view a wide range of classical Indian dance and music performances on concert stages.

Reviews of the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance Festival and later the Drive East Festival in New York City highlighted the complex ways these festivals introduce American audiences to classical Indian dance forms and establish classical Indian dance as a fixture on American concert stages. In the initial reviews on Erasing Borders of Indian Dance Festival, critics would describe in detail the "coordination of upper-and lower-body parts, the lively interplay of both arm gestures and foot rhythms, the complex sense of through-the-body line and unequaled articulation of the eyes," in explaining the differences between best-known classical forms in the

US, Bharata Natyam, Odissi and Kathak (Macaulay 2009). Much like their predecessors John Martin and Walter Terry, in explaining Bharata Natyam's "sharp, geometrical designs," and Odissi's "subtle torso shifts," present-day dance critics' explanations of classical Indian dance techniques teach American audiences how to view these forms. However, also similar to early 20th century dance critics, some reviewers write about classical dances as distant objects that are too "strange" or "foreign" for American audiences to understand. In a *New York Times* review, author Siobhan Burke writes that classical Indian dances "inspire a more removed kind of reverence, as something to be admired from afar, like a sacred object," (2014). In previewing the Drive East festival, *New York Times* critic Gia Kourlas wrote the festival is "not quite a trip to India, but for an entertaining and illuminating cultural fix, it will do just fine" (2014). In writing about classical Indian dance as a distant object, critics also make assumptions about the dancers' identities. In an early review of Erasing Borders, Macaulay wrote of his surprise to learn about a Bharata Natyam group being based in Toronto because he had assumed such Indianness must "come direct from India" (2009). The reviews of classical Indian dance festivals highlight the excitement critics and audiences feel for having opportunities to see a high volume of classical Indian dance festivals in their detailed descriptions of these forms. Yet, these reviews' racist comments continue to circulate Orientalist notions of classical Indian dances' spirituality that reinforce these dances as ancient and traditional authentic representations of Indian culture, and not part of the American cultural landscape.

As dance critics regularly reviewed the Erasing Borders of Indian Dance and Drive East Festivals, they also wrote about the growing number of practitioners presenting pieces that navigated the tensions around preserving tradition and making it relevant to a contemporary audience. Work that blended classical Indian dance with other movement aesthetics and themes

was not always well received by critics as they would comment on the superfluous nature of fusion pieces, while the traditional selections seemed the freshest (Seibert 2016). Critics began to observe the tensions classical Indian dance practitioners face, noting that while "practitioners of Indian classical dance are rightly proud of the ancient heritage they embody and as devoted as they are to gurus, and lineage and tradition, though, they are also artists of the present, and many of them, especially the young, long to be innovative, up-to-date, relevant" (Seibert 2016). Second-generation practitioners do not just long to be relevant; their work is relevant. As Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, second-generation dancers rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues to position Bharata Natyam as key part of the American cultural landscape (not just something that is far-removed from this landscape). A few second-generation practitioners I spoke to expressed their frustration at American dance critics' reviews on their dancing, wishing they would go beyond mentioning the "beautiful aspect of Indian dance" and write about the complexity of rhythms, expressions, and innovative aspects in their performances. Second-generation choreographers' work responds to the long history of Indian dance on American stages and is connected to the twentieth-century artists discussed in this chapter in the ways they negotiate American dance critics and audiences expectations of Indian dance. In the following chapters, I examine how classical Indian dance practitioners are growing and changing classical Indian dance forms on American concert dances to reflect the relevance of these practices within the American context.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined a variety of US tours by Indian dance practitioners throughout the 20th century. Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Indrani

Rahman and Shanta Rao all established and popularized Indian dance practices in the US and India. Their development of Indian dance practices happened in relation to the revival of classical Indian dance practices (and some of these artists played a direct role in reviving Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Mohini Attam, and Manipuri). Discourses of Orientalism and exoticism impacted the circulation of South Asian dance practices in the US through the ways US dance practitioners were invited to perform on American stages that familiarized audiences with classical Indian dance aesthetics between 1920 and 1965. These discourses also impacted the ways these artists were marginalized or excluded from concert stages, while more acceptable white bodies seized representational control of Indian dance. In the next chapter, I continue to examine the popularity of classical Indian dance festivals like Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival in Ohio, in addition to Erasing Borders of Indian Dance and Drive East Festivals for the South Asian diaspora in the US and the relationship of these festivals to the Chennai Music and Dance Season in Tamil Nadu, India. I specifically analyze how these festivals are platforms for second-generation Indian Americans to choreograph and perform classical dance pieces that are up-to-date and relevant, that reflect their experiences of growing up and living in the US.

Chapter Two

"Negotiating Tradition": Examining Aesthetic and Thematic Changes to Bharata Natyam Practice within US-based Classical Indian Dance Festivals

Introduction

"Say something, say something, say something..." To the *tishra* (three) *chapu* rhythmic pattern (*tha ki ta*), dancers Sahasra Sambamoorthi, Nadhi Thekkek, and Rasika Kumar, attired in pink, yellow, and green *kurtas* (tunics) stand in a diagonal line, feet together, arms and torsos swaying side to side in unison in *Unfiltered* (2019). Their expressions are somber as they focus on their hands, drawing the audience's attention towards the snaking, circular pattern they make with their arms. "Say something (*tha ki ta*), say something (*tha ki ta*), say something (*tha ki ta*)…" As the vocal accompaniment grows louder, the dancers break from the diagonal line, sharply punctuating *tha ki ta* with their feet. They strike the flats of their feet on the stage to *tha ki ta* while simultaneously unfurling and extending their hands outwards from their mouths to convey the statement of "say something." "Not my fault (*tha ki ta*), not my fault (*tha ki ta*), not my fault (*tha ki ta*)…" The dancers' *adavus* (basic steps) become sharper and rapid as they travel in different directions across the stage. Their expressions are direct and focused as they take turns conveying the sentiment of the statement "not my fault," by crossing their arms in front of their bodies and forcefully pushing their arms down and to the side. As the vocalist alternates between reciting "say something," "not my fault," and *tha ki ta*, the dancer's *adavus* continue to

punctuate *tishra chapu* clearly and succinctly through their footwork, hands, and focused expressions. The forcefulness of their movements carries to the end of the piece when all the dancers return to the diagonal line and perform a high-speed *jathi* (a *nritta*[12] sequence that incorporates high-speed, complex footwork and hand gestures) to the *tha ki ta* rhythmic pattern, concluding with a *theermanam* (a set of three steps repeated thrice).

In 2019, Sambamoorthi, Thekkek, and Kumar presented *Unfiltered* at the Drive East Festival in New York City. In it, they drew from their own experiences as well as anonymous experiences of the women in their lives to examine the impact of the #metoo movement, a social movement started by activist Tarana Burke against sexual abuse and harassment, on South Asian women in the diaspora. Throughout the piece, the dancers and musicians alternate between repeating "say something, not my fault" and *sollakattu*, the vocal articulation of the drumbeats, interwoven with *jathis* and *abhinaya* (expression) to convey the experiences of South Asian women who have faced sexual harassment and abuse in the diaspora. The intensity of the dancers' focus, the clarity and swiftness of their *adavus*, and the inclusion of spoken word in *Unfiltered* convey the ways in which Sambamoorthi, Thekkek, and Kumar extend the boundaries of Bharata Natyam by exploring contemporary themes through Bharata Natyam vocabulary and rhythm. In reworking the vocal accompaniment, rhythmic structures, and movement vocabulary, they also explore the relevance of Bharata Natyam in their lives in confronting contemporary issues that impact their experiences as second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners living in the US.

[12] *Nritta* – "pure" dance meaning the demonstration of rhythm through body movements. This movement does not convey any meaning or narrative.

This chapter examines the aesthetic and thematic changes that second-generation practitioners make in Bharata Natyam through the work they present at Indian classical dance festivals in the US and India. I argue that second-generation Indian American practitioners challenge and transform Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, caste, tradition, and nationalism through practices manifesting cultural hybridity. Their first-generation parents and dance teachers passed on to them Indian cultural attitudes that emphasized the importance of learning dance, Indian mythology, and language to maintain links to Indian culture. The desire to transform Indian cultural attitudes further stems from a desire to make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice in the US. "Accessible" means two things: 1) audiences outside the South Asian diaspora understand the work; and 2) increasing performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam practitioners to showcase their work. The emphasis on learning dance to maintain links to Indian culture in the US privileges and perpetuates an upper-caste, Brahmin, Hindu identity. Therefore, Making Bharata Natyam a relevant practice also means challenging who holds power and has privilege in the global Bharata Natyam community. The second-generation practitioners I discuss in this chapter question hierarchies of caste and class in Bharata Natyam through conversations at US-based festivals. In these conversations, second-generation practitioners acknowledge their caste privilege in discussing ways to make Bharata Natyam practice a more inclusive space for groups who have been and continue to be marginalized by upper-caste Bharata Natyam practitioners. In making Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice, they rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media from within their own generational, political, social, and cultural context in the US.

By examining the aesthetic and thematic changes to the Bharata Natyam repertoire presented at US-based festivals, this chapter examines how second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners navigate staying connected to and being critical of their cultural heritage through making Bharata Natyam inclusive and accessible to audiences outside of the South Asian diaspora. The ways second-generation practitioners make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice is distinct from the ways first-generation practitioners teach and practice Bharata Natyam to maintain Indian culture and values. Understanding how second-generation practitioners choreograph and perform their positionalities is important for articulating the complexities of their Indian American diasporic identities.

To situate the aesthetic and thematic changes second-generation practitioners make to the Bharata Natyam repertoire, it is important to understand how practitioners define Indian classical and modern dance. Indian classical dance is an umbrella term for dance practices that can be traced to the *Natyashastra*, an ancient text on dramaturgy. The *Natyashastra* outlines postures, gestures and movements that influence present day Indian classical dances. Today the Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's national academy for music, dance, and drama, recognizes eight Indian classical dance styles: Bharata Natyam from Tamil Nadu; Kathak from Uttar Pradesh; Kathakali and Mohiniyattam from Kerala; Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh; Odissi from Odisha; Sattriya from Assam; and, Manipuri from Manipur. In this chapter I focus my analysis on Bharata Natyam because of the high volume of Bharata Natyam performances at these festivals and from my own embodied knowledge as a student, performer, choreographer, and teacher of Bharata Natyam. Bharata Natyam is distinct from other Indian classical dance forms through its characterization as a grounded, symmetrical, and linear style. A key position in Bharata Natyam technique is the *aramandi* or half-seated position, in which Bharata Natyam dancers bring their

weight down, feet and knees turned out, with the weight evenly distributed between their feet. In addition, there are dance steps called *adavus*, an elaborate vocabulary of *mudras* (hand gestures), and *abhinaya* (the use of facial expressions to convey stories and emotions).

This chapter largely focuses on the development of Bharata Natyam as a classical style in the US. However, to understand the aesthetic and thematic changes second-generation practitioners make to the Bharata Natyam repertoire as they set choreography for the concert stage, it is also important to provide a definition of Indian modern dance. This definition underscores the ways second-generation practitioners see Bharata Natyam as a "modern" medium. In this context, the use of "modern" signifies a time marker, as they perform Bharata Natyam to highlight their social, cultural, and political realities. In *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism, and Transnationalism*, Prarthana Purkayastha defines Indian modern dance "as a clear rupture from the temple and court traditions of dance performance during colonialism in the late nineteenth century, a changed ideological relationship between dance and the religious domain, and a conscious and critical engagement of dance with the political and the social domains" (2014, 16). Purkayastha's definition helps frame the work that second-generation practitioners present at US-based festivals because Indian American practitioners view Bharata Natyam as a living, breathing language that transcends cultural, religious, and social boundaries. Bharata Natyam practice becomes a flexible medium for them to speak about their experiences of growing up in the US, as opposed to a static practice that reinforces Indian cultural attitudes. Examining how second-generation practitioners stylistically and thematically present Bharata Natyam as a modern medium while still labeling the form as classical drives the core argument of this chapter, wherein I analyze the stakes for practitioners to make classical Indian dance visible in the US.

To understand the importance of US-based Indian classical dance festivals in the South Asian diaspora and how second-generation practitioners shape and present their work at these festivals, I first examine the relationship of US-based festivals to the Chennai Music and Dance Season in Chennai, India because many of these festivals are marketed in relation to the size of the Madras Music and Dance Season. The conversations that take place at the Music and Dance Season around what is considered classical Indian dance impact how second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam as a diasporic practice in the US. Specifically, the conversations and debates around deviating from traditional repertoire formats, amateur performers, and the system of paying for performance opportunities impact how second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam as they navigate how to evolve Bharata Natyam traditional repertoire pieces to make them more accessible to audiences in the US and abroad.

I then analyze the emergence of Indian classical dance and music festivals in the US and the importance of these festivals as platforms for second-generation practitioners to showcase their pursuits as professional artists and push the boundaries of traditional Bharata Natyam repertoires. I first analyze the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival, the oldest classical Indian dance festival in the US. Established in Cleveland, Ohio in 1978, the Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival is the largest Indian music and dance festival outside of India, taking place over twelve days, three venues, and featuring music and dance artists from India, Canada, and the US. The festival features group and solo performances; the festival committee confers awards on participants. Examining how the festival committee awards festival participants will make clear the parameters of traditional Bharata Natyam practice and how Bharata Natyam practitioners push the boundaries of tradition, religion, and nationalism in the work they present at the Cleveland Thyagaraja festival and other US-based festivals. Within the festival, I also

analyze the Bharata Natyam competition. Examining the structure of the festival and the Bharata Natyam competition underscores the importance of increasing support, resources, and performance opportunities for second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners to make the form more visible in the US.

The second festival I examine is the Drive East Festival, which began in New York City in 2013. The popularity of the initial one-week festival led organizers to expand the festival two more weeks to two other cities: San Francisco (2018) and Plano, Texas (2020). This festival provides a platform for second-generation practitioners to innovate and push the boundaries of tradition in establishing the importance of Indian classical dance in the US. I am interested in analyzing how the work of second-generation practitioners reflects the shared objective between these festivals of pushing the boundaries of tradition while asserting the identity of Bharata Natyam as a classical Indian dance form.

The last festival I analyze is the Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance, hosted by the Indo-American Arts Council (IAAC) based out of New York City. The IAAC is an American non-profit cultural organization based in New York City that promotes Indian theater, fashion, music, film, art, and dance. In 2008, the council established their annual dance festival which takes place in different venues in Lower Manhattan. Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance features Indian classical and modern dance styles and offers dance workshops and lectures in addition to performances. The Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance is an important platform for second-generation practitioners to challenge and push against the boundaries of different Indian classical and modern dance forms through incorporating contemporary issues and media.

In addition to analyzing the importance of Indian classical dance festivals in the US and India and the platforms these festivals provide for second-generation practitioners to make

aesthetic and thematic changes to traditional Bharata Natyam repertoires, this chapter analyzes how festival organizers shifted these festivals to online platforms. In 2019, I attended the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival in person. In 2020, COVID-19 prevented me from traveling to the Cleveland Thyagaraja, Drive East, and Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance festivals. When the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival, held annually in April, was first postponed, then canceled for the first time in forty-two years, I was not sure what the future of my research project would be. In July 2020, I received notification that the organizers of the Drive East Festival would be moving the event completely online. This was followed by the news that the Chennai Music and Dance Season and Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance would also be held online. As I viewed these festivals from the comfort of my home in Riverside, California during continued COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, I missed the experience of attending the festival in person but was also grateful and excited by the possibilities of accessing these festivals remotely. My excitement was furthered by the template of these festivals, where they not only live-streamed performances from theaters in the artists' locations, but also included content that provided a glimpse into the artists' processes and their lives under lockdown, as well as rich panel discussions.

The experience of viewing festivals onscreen is situated within a conversation in the field of screendance studies on how the shift to online festivals makes them more accessible (as in, viewers can watch them from their home internet connections), provides more opportunities for networking because practitioners can meet people virtually in different parts of the world, and more opportunities for discussion across different geographical locations. One version of this conversation took place during a roundtable discussion titled "Screendance Festivals and Online Audiences" at the *This Is Where We Dance Now: COVID-19 and the New And Next in Dance Onscreen* online symposium (March 2021). In particular, roundtable panelists who had been

producing in-person festivals (and some online festivals) pre-pandemic saw the potential of online festivals in this current moment to include international audiences that previously would not have attended in-person screenings and performances. In the context of US-based Indian classical dance festivals and the Madras Music and Dance Season, there was an acknowledgement of the increased opportunities for networking and inclusion of audiences from different geographical locations that the online platform provided. There were also some practitioners and dance critics who were dissatisfied with the online festivals because they were not the same experience as attending them in person (more distractions and not experiencing *rasa*) Despite varying viewpoints, the question of how practitioners represent themselves digitally as Indian classical dancers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, was addressed in each of the festivals I attended in 2020.

In addition to the issues that second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners faced in 2020 around the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners also addressed anti-Black racism in their work, and discussed the marginalization of hereditary practitioners in Indian classical dance practices, and casteism within the Bharata Natyam community in the US and India. Anti-Black racism is a pervasive issue in India and the South Asian diaspora, evident in the skincare products that are promoted to "lighten" skin, and the "model minority" myth, a myth that falsely praises Asian Americans as inherently hardworking and willing to assimilate (this myth dismisses structural racism in the US) (Ramachandran 2021). The importance of addressing anti-Black racism in the South Asian community was heightened by the protests for racial justice and civil rights in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. Some of the pieces I analyze from the Drive East and Erasing Borders 2020 festivals demonstrate the commitment second-generation practitioners are making to confronting anti-Black racism in the South Asian

community. The shift to online platforms and the issues that second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners faced in 2020 around anti-Black racism, the marginalization of hereditary practitioners, and casteism, are integral to examining the aesthetic and thematic changes to the Bharata Natyam repertoire as second-generation practitioners negotiate their identities to make Bharata Natyam more inclusive and accessible to diverse audiences in the US. These changes are part of making Bharata Natyam a relevant practice that highlights their experiences of living in the US and being American.

Chennai Music and Dance Season: The Cultural Center of India

The Chennai Music and Dance Season impacts the ways second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners shape US-based festivals. Held annually from December through mid-January, the Music and Dance Season is the largest international Indian music and dance festival featuring over one thousand concerts, performances, lecture demonstrations, and conferences across multiple performances venues in Chennai. Conversations around defining, preserving, and interrogating notions of traditional and contemporary Bharata Natyam performance start in Chennai and shape how US-based classical dance festivals curate Bharata Natyam performances, that then impact the stakes for Indian American practitioners to grow and make Bharata Natyam more visible in the United States. The connection between the Chennai Music and Dance Season and the US-based festivals begins with the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival. The connection between the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival and the Chennai Music and Dance Season is established through the fact that the first-place winner of the Bharata Natyam competition earns a performance slot at the Chennai Music and Dance Season. The Chennai Music and Dance Season has also impacted the emergence of the Drive East Festival, which considers itself a

"mini season" that features over forty programs (including performances, panel discussions, and workshops). I examine the connections between the Chennai Music and Dance Season and US-based festivals and the issues that arise from the visibility of Bharata Natyam as a global practice, to provide further insights on the ways second-generation practitioners negotiate notions of tradition in building a diasporic dance practice in the US.

The Chennai Music and Dance Season was integral to establishing the parameters of classical Indian music and dance since it was established at the Music Academy in 1928. To understand the significance of the Chennai Music and Dance Season, it is important to examine the significance of Bharata Natyam practice in Chennai. Janet O'Shea's *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* (2007) examines how Madras (the British colonial name of the city until 1996) came to be a cultural center of colonial India and how Bharata Natyam came to be central to its culture. O'Shea states that the colonial annexation of the Thanjavur region destroyed the patronage networks that supported dance by disempowering the kings who sponsored court performances and funded the temples in this region. Because colonialism dismantled the patronage systems in the Thanjavur region, Bharata Natyam (under its previous name *sadir*) and Carnatic music performances in the 19th and 20th centuries moved from the towns and villages of the Thanjavur region to the concert halls of Madras. Madras was established a cultural center due to two factors: the Sanskrit manuscript *Sarvadevavilasa*, which describes the city and its performances, and celebrates bringing cultural practitioners to Madras from outside the city; the second factor was the patronage of the *Velallas* or landlords from an upper-caste, non-Brahmin community, who drew performing artists to Madras (O'Shea 2007, 140). India's nationalist movement for independence in the early 20th century further established Madras as the cultural center of India and Bharata Natyam central to its culture by the ways in

which Bharata Natyam revivalists reconfigured the form—the removal of erotic narratives from choreography, and changes in pedagogy, shifting from *gurukula* system or one-on-one instruction from *nattuvanars* to institutional instruction in schools like Kalakshetra—that led Bharata Natyam practitioners to reestablish the form outside of its place of origin. The reconfiguration of Bharata Natyam into a classical dance form, aided by the establishment of venues, concert series, and Bharata Natyam schools, reinforced Chennai as an arts center, and the Music and Dance Season was established to enforce this status.

I experienced the scale and scope of the Chennai Music and Dance Season as the largest, most prestigious Indian arts festival in the world when I attended in 2009. At that time, I was struck not only by the volume and depth of the many music and dance performances I saw back-to-back over the span of a month, but also the frenzy of traveling between venues to see these performances (it was common to see up to four performances in one evening). I was also struck by the conversations and debates around the work presented at the Chennai Music and Dance Festival and how competitive it was to secure a performance slot at one of the venues during the Season. Indian dance critics and practitioners capture these conversations and debates in their reviews on the Chennai Music and Dance Season.

Dance critic Lalitha Venkat situates Chennai as an authoritative site of Bharata Natyam practice and the importance of the Chennai Music and Dance Season in establishing this site. Venkat notes that the "Chennai December season is so very art filled that we get to interact with art lovers both as performers and audience from all over the globe!" (Venkat 2011, narthaki.com). While recognizing how the Season brings audiences and performers from all over the world, Venkat is also vexed by some components of the festival. She states that:

> The Season is getting more crowded and less imaginative annually. It is impossible in the cacophony of performances. The Chennai Season is surely a mad time as referred to by many critics. It has however become a season for showcasing amateur dancing at the cost of performances by good, professional and serious dancers, who resist the temptation to pay and dance instead of receiving payment for the dance…. Quantity over quality. For the general public, new entrant and the NRIs, it's a feast! It's like going to a mithai (confectioner) shop and not knowing what to buy and what to eat? But can one eat mithai or wedding food 12 hours a day for 30 days without suffering acidity, diarrhea or indigestion? Normal human beings may find it too much and stay away for most parts and partake only what can be digested. (Venkat 2011, narthaki.com)

These statements articulate some issues that reflect the state of Bharata Natyam in the Chennai Music and Dance Season like the abundance of amateur performers and the increasing role of paying to perform. The frustration on the issue of paying to perform is often directed towards Non-Resident Indians (NRIs),[13] because they have more social connections and economic resources coming from abroad and because of their connections, resources, and upper caste positionalities, are seen as taking away performance opportunities from local Bharata Natyam practitioners.

Bharata Natyam practitioner V.P. Dhananjayan echoes Venkat's concerns that the abundance of amateur performers reduces the quality of the festival. In his article "Supply Side Bharatanatyam?" he writes that "…the Chennai season is not an indication that all's well with

[13] Non-resident Indians are people of Indian birth, descent, or origin who live outside the Republic of India. The term Non-resident Indian also refers to the tax status of a citizen who has not resided in India for a specified period of time.

Bharatanatyam; for in truth, mediocrity is edging out merit." He wonders "…whether merit still has a place in an ever growing line-up of performers," and argues that performances are taking place in venues regardless of whether there is an audience. Dhananjayan compares the current state of Bharata Natyam performance in the Season to "commercial reality shows" that showcase new talent but do not promote "meritorious" performers. Often, these aspiring or amateur performers will not only pay exorbitant sums of money for a spot in the Season but somehow wrangle a press review or have a photo published in the local newspapers (Dhananjayan 2011). These remarks strike at the heart of the concerns and issues facing the current state of Bharata Natyam performance during the Season and speak to a concern about the organization of the venues and their system of paying to perform, and its impact on the caliber of dancers and performers.

To examine the perception of mediocrity and paying for performances opportunities, it is important to understand how Bharata Natyam is produced in Chennai. Shanti Pillai's article "Rethinking Global Indian Dance through Local Eyes: The Contemporary Bharatanatyam Scene in Chennai" provides context for analyzing the issues Venkat and Dhananjayan raise as she examines the implications of Bharata Natyam as a global practice. She asserts that, "generally speaking, money is the judge of merit" (Pillai 2002, 16). To secure a performance slot, dancers apply to the *sabha* (arts organization) by submitting a resume and a video of their performances. It is a competitive process that should be judged on merit. However, as Pillai states, "opportunities to perform can be less dependent on skill and more on a dancer's economic resources and social connections" (2002, 17). The possible reason for this has to do with high production costs. Because most of the concerts are free, dancers must have the economic resources to meet production costs. The heaviest costs may be for the guru or teacher and for the

accompanying musicians, followed by arranging dress rehearsals, technicians, makeup artists, costume tailors, and set designers. Examining the issues of building "prestige," Pillai points at (as does Dhananjayan) the importance of receiving reviews in a newspaper such as *The Hindu*. She notes that getting a review in the newspaper is instrumental to a dancer's performance prestige. However, "it is not uncommon for dancers to hound critics for reviews, showing up at their homes to personally invite them to performances or to present them with gifts or even outright offering of money" (Pillai 2002, 17). In outlining these issues, Pillai (like Venkat) notes how the presence of NRI Bharata Natyam performers in Chennai have compounded these issues because having more economic resources and social connections favors NRI performers, and few Indians can compete with the economic clout of NRIs. The influx of NRI performers in Chennai is due to the notion that performing in India becomes "…a source of pride for immigrants, for whom ethnic identity is often predicated on the 'traditional' cultural values they believe are embodied by India's classical arts" (Pillai 2002, 18). As a result, Chennai-based Bharata Natyam practitioners' frustrations over growing mediocrity and paying for performances opportunities is often directed towards NRIs.

In addition to the frustrations of paying to perform, there are also debates on the changes to traditional performance formats during the Chennai Music and Dance Season. I recall a conversation I had with one of my teachers when I was living in India during the 2009 Season. We were discussing a performance by one of the top performers in the field because their performance deviated from the traditional format in terms of setting dances to musical compositions that these dances normally are not set to. This change upset my teacher who felt that dances should only be danced to the music they have been traditionally set to. The conversation situates the debate around tradition that impacts the choices dancers make in the US

when choreographing Bharata Natyam. As Pillai notes in discussing the debate on tradition in Chennai, tradition is "…the culmination of a selective process that aims to establish a historical and cultural continuity in response to and ratifying the present order of things" which is why not all of the new developments are greeted with enthusiasm by local producers and audiences" (2002, 15). In analyzing how the concept of tradition circulates in Chennai, she also explores the impact of Bharata Natyam practice abroad on Bharata Natyam practice in Chennai stating that those who practice Bharata Natyam outside India, in addition to those in or out of India who are interested in innovating based on classical forms, pursue their work with reference to something they refer to as "tradition." The tradition of Bharata Natyam as it is pursued outside of India, "…often means valuing the dance as a 'carrier of culture' and seeing Bharata Natyam as somehow timeless and ever available for accessing an essential 'Indianness'" (Pillai 2002, 16). The aesthetic and thematic changes that second-generation practitioners make to Bharata Natyam are innovations based on classical forms that they reference as tradition. However, as the pieces further discussed in the chapter exemplify, these innovations push against the notion that Bharata Natyam is timeless and are critical of dance as a carrier of culture, as they adapt the practice to convey their experiences of living in the US.

For the 2020 Season, The Federation of City Sabhas, a congregation of the leading *sabhas* (performance organizations/venues in Chennai) and the arts organization, Kalakendra made the decision to hold the festival online. Audiences could access performances through a website titled, "Yours Truly, Margazhi," which featured videos of over 100 performances with 250 artists in Carnatic concerts, dance performances, workshops, lecture demonstrations, and dramas. The format of the 2020 Chennai Music and Dance Season highlighted the continued ways Indian classical dance artists navigated the realities of 2020 in the ways they present

performances online (narthaki.com 2020). Accessible online from December 15, 2020 to January 15, 2021, The "Yours Truly, Margazhi," festival featured mostly Carnatic music performances but there were dance performances towards the end of the festival by Chennai-based Bharata Natyam performers. I focus on one of the performances by famed Chennai-based Bharata Natyam practitioner, Malavika Sarukkai. Sarukkai as a choreographer and performer is known for exploring contemporary themes through Bharata Natyam vocabulary. Her performance for the "Yours Truly, Margazhi," festival was a presentation of the traditional Bharata Natyam *margam* or repertoire. Sarukkai's choice to perform a *margam* reinforced the importance of the Music and Dance Season to establishing Chennai as the cultural center of India. Further, Sarukkai's performance reinforces the notion of Bharata Natyam as a "traditional" practice as audiences all over the world watched this festival online.

Sarukkai's performance of the traditional *margam* emphasized the importance of the online platform during 2020 for viewing and performing Indian classical dance for audiences and practitioners all over the world. Standing in front of a microphone next to a bronze statue of Nataraja, the lord of dance, she began her performance with an acknowledgment of the unprecedented challenges Indian artists face due to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. She noted that while these challenges have been difficult to navigate, people are turning to Indian music, dance, and theater to keep their spirits up. While these circumstances are difficult, this pandemic in some sense has brought a sharper focus to the importance of the arts in our lives and how the arts enrich our lives. Without the arts, the last few months would have been much more difficult. After introducing the accompanying artists, Sarukkai concluded her introductory remarks by stating that her performance celebrates the aesthetics of classical Indian dance, which in itself is a "celebration of the mystery." Sarukkai's performance featured key *margam* pieces

like the *Pushpanjali*, meaning offering, the *Varnam,* a piece that tests the dancer's interpretive and rhythmic skills, and the *Thillana*, in which dancers stretch their rhythmic skills and are challenged by the increasing beat, pace, rhythm and complexity of the *mridangam*, a south Indian percussive instrument. Sarukkai's performance demonstrated the aesthetics of classical Indian dance from the way she struck the stage with her feet in *samapadam* (standing pose), hands on her waist, then swiftly and sharply shifted to *aramandi*, both hands holding the *kathakamukha mudra* (hand gesture that translates as bracelet link). Her expression wove together varying sentiments of love, anger, and wonder while she articulated the *mishra chapu* (seven-beat rhythm) pattern, *tha ki ta, tha ka dimi* with her feet. Sarukkai's performance highlighted the role of the Music and Dance Season in upholding classical dance aesthetics. Further, Sarukkai's performance highlighted the importance of online festivals for accessing and watching Indian classical dance during the first year of the pandemic, while also establishing the Music and Dance Season's role in promoting Chennai as the cultural center of India.

The Federation of City Sabhas presented an opportunity to experience the excitement of the season by moving the Chennai Music and Dance Season online. However, not all audiences agreed the online Chennai Music and Dance Season captured the excitement and energy of the in-person Season. The website, "Narthaki: Gateway to the World of Dance" features a monthly column by Anita Ratnam, founder and editor of Narthaki.com, in which she highlights different classical Indian dance events and issues in Chennai and other parts of the world. In her comments on the Chennai Music and Dance Season in the January 2021 column, she places her thoughts under the heading "#theinvisibleseason." Underneath the hashtag, she writes:

> What can I say? Except nothing has changed. Chennai is feeling the loss of the NRI visits. Stores are empty, retail is down, restaurants are half empty and the streets of Mylapore and T Nagar are not chock a block with traffic jams. Canteens attached to Sabhas are catering for takeouts and doing surprisingly well, thanks to Instagram! All programming has moved online and there is little to report by way of anything new or different. Well known performers in Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam dominate the roster and we wait for another 12 months until the return of the REAL SEASON (Ratnam 2021)

Ratnam's comments highlight the economic impact of the pandemic on the Chennai Music and Dance Season (the loss of NRI tourist visits, retail down). Her comments also underscore the tension between preservation and innovation in the Bharata Natyam community that was exacerbated by the online festival, in which she states that "there wasn't anything new or different presented in the online festival" (Ratnam 2021). Other reviews of Chennai Music and Dance Season were similar in tone to Ratnam's, lamenting on missing the exciting aspects of attending the Chennai Music and Dance season like eating at the *sabha* cafeterias and the chaos of attending multiple performances in the evening. As one reviewer in *The Hindu*, Viashna Roy, noted, "can a digital Margazhi hope to replicate even a fraction of this rich excitement? I humbly suggest that it should not even try. We flâneurs will wait patiently for next year" (Roy 2021). However another review in *The Hindu* by Sanjeev Subrahmanyan, wrote of their appreciation for the digital Chennai Music and Dance Season stating that "as a result of all these initiatives and new ways of thinking and performing in the online space, the old days of the patron/promoter deciding who should be featured has become redundant. There is a democratic level playing field

on the digital platform for everyone to explore and experience" (Subrahmanyan 2021). Subrahmanyan's comments suggest that moving the festival online might address the issue classical Indian dance practitioners face when wanting to perform at the Chennai Music and Dance Season, the issue being that these opportunities often depend on a dancer's economic resources and social connections. However, as Ratnam's earlier comments emphasized, only the well-known performers in Carnatic music and Bharata Natyam dominated the program, leaving little space for newer performers to perform at the online festival. Further, there was a fee to access the performances, thus calling into question the accessibility of holding the festival online. These reviews of the digital Chennai Music and Dance Season suggest a variety of responses to holding the festival online from the lack of innovation and the issue of featuring well-known performers to a recognition that the online festival is not the same as the in-person one (especially because not having an in-person festival means you miss out on a lot of good food!).

While it was fascinating to experience the online version of the Chennai Music and Dance Season, it was hard to get a sense of who was in the audience for the performances without post-performance Zoom discussions or Facebook or YouTube live chats. The Natya Kala Conference, an important conference that is integral to establishing a space for practitioners to discuss the issues within Bharata Natyam practice globally, was canceled, so there was no opportunity to have conversations on the current state of Bharata Natyam. The multitude of debates on innovation vs. tradition and the economic inequities within the structures of the Season enhance the in-person experience of attending the Chennai Music and Dance Season. While it was challenging to get a sense of the conversations Bharata Natyam artists had on the overall challenges of making work during a global pandemic and debate on Bharata Natyam

practice, the performances featured on "Yours Truly, Margazhi," showcased Chennai as the established cultural center of India and the Chennai Music and Dance Season's role in upholding that status. US-based practitioners also grappled with the possibilities and challenges of holding classical Indian dance festivals online. In desiring audiences to experience online festivals in a similar way to attending performances in-person, second-generation practitioners also discussed and reflected on their responsibility to expand the Bharata Natyam repertoire during the COVID-19 pandemic to make it a culturally relevant practice in the US.

The Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival: Establishing Tradition and the Importance of Indian Classical Arts in the Diaspora

The Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival continues to grow in popularity as performers and audiences from the South Asian diaspora in the US and India attend the multi-day festival. To understand the centrality of this festival in the South Asian diaspora, Case Western University's *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* (1987) provides the history of the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival. Indian immigrants belonging to an informal music group, the "Cleveland Bhajan Group," established the festival to create more opportunities to showcase Indian arts. The idea to start a Thyagaraja *Aradhana*, a festival that honors the work of 18th century Telegu saint composer/poet, Thyagaraja, was modeled off the Thyagaraja Aradhana in Toronto, Canada. The first Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival occurred at a rented hall in the basement of a Cleveland church. The first festival's popularity led organizers to relocate it to the Waetjen Auditorium in Cleveland State University's Music Building; since 1979, the Festival has been held at CSU's Music Building and other halls near CSU. As the Encyclopedia of Cleveland History entry notes, the festival began with fewer than a hundred people. In 2019,

over 8000 people attended the festival. Since 1987, the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival occurs on Easter weekend, utilizing a Christian holiday to make it easier for students at local schools to attend because they have that weekend off for spring break (Sardesai 2020). The continued growth and popularity of this festival that features artists from India and North America highlights the importance of Indian classical arts within the South Asian diaspora in the US. The Cleveland Bhajan Group established the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival during the first substantial wave of South Asian immigration to the US in the 1960s and 1970s. In an interview in *The Hindu*, India's national English-language newspaper, V.V. Sundaram, one of the founders of the annual Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival, noted that when he first moved to the US to study at the University of Pittsburgh, there were not many Indians and few opportunities to see or perform Indian classical arts. In Chapter One, I examined the emergence of classical Indian dance on American concert stages in the 20th century. Sundaram's perception that there were few opportunities to see or perform Indian classical arts reflects the changing immigration landscape in the 1960s. One of the opportunities to see classical Indian arts was through the Asia Society[14] which sponsored the US tours of Indian artists' Ravi Shankar, Indrani Rahman and Shanta Rao in the 1960s. Other opportunities involved music festivals in large cities like the "Festival From India," which featured artists Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar, and Bismillah Khan, all *Hindustani*[15] classical musicians (*Los Angeles Times* 1967). Through their Performing Arts Program, the Asia Society arranged for the Indian artists to perform at college campuses in the US. Prior to establishing the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival in 1978, Sundaram and his colleagues at Pitt

[14] The Asia Society was founded by American philanthropist John Dr. Rockefeller III in 1956 as a nonprofit and nonpartisan educational institution. The institution's purpose was to increase American understanding and appreciation of Asia to foster greater cooperation between Asia and the US (see Chapter 1 for more information).
[15] *Hindustani* is classical music from the northern regions of the Indian subcontinent

organized recitals at the university's auditorium that campus administrators provided to them for free. These recitals' popularity gave them the confidence to invite more artists from India and organize tours for these artists. The growing interest in Indian classical arts led Sundaram and other fellow Indian musicians and dancers to establish the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival (Gautam 2012). The interest in establishing Indian classical arts in the 1960s and 1970s is important for understanding the dynamics of the largest wave of South Asian immigration to the US.

The largest wave of South Asian immigration to the US provides key context for understanding the proliferation of Indian classical arts in the US. Priya Srinivasan (2011) examines the different waves of South Asian immigration to the US. Srinivasan analyzes the second major wave of South Asian immigrants after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act). This act altered the immigration landscape for South Asians as many Asian professionals were able to enter the United States for the first time and apply for citizenship. Srinivasan focuses her study on Bharata Natyam practice in the US noting that after 1965, Bharata Natyam schools were established by the wives of Indian male professionals. Some of these wives were trained dancers from India and because their non-citizenship status hindered their work opportunities upon their immediate arrival to the US, they set up dance schools in several US cities. Srinivasan argues that Indians arriving in the United States after 1965 have fared differently from those who preceded them because they were able to gain "green cards, become permanent residents, eventually obtain citizenship and become cosmopolitans inhabiting multiple spaces with flexible citizenship possibilities" (2011, 26). Srinivasan's analysis on the growing popularity of Bharata Natyam practice in the US after the second major wave of South Asian immigration provides key context for understanding the

factors that led to the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival through which South Asian dance practices start to appear more frequently in the US.

The socio-economic status of South Asians after 1965 also impacted the popularity of South Asian arts in the US. Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* also analyzes the Hart-Celler Act, noting that it was a watershed year in US immigration that propelled the migration of technically skilled professionals and students from India. She focuses her study on second-generation Indian American youth in the 1980s and 1990s and their practice of re-mixed Bhangra (a folk form from Punjab, India). Maira notes that the new criteria for visas shaped the characteristics of post-1965 Indian immigrants who, in a relatively short time, acquired middle-to upper-middle class status (2002, 7). Maira's analyses of the socio-economic status of post-1965 immigrants situates the emphasis that first-generation parents put on their second-generation children to study dance as a way to maintain their upper-class-and-caste status in the US.

The Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival emerges from the post-1965 wave of immigrants' desire to bring visibility to Indian classical arts in the US and to impart Indian traditions and authentic values to second-generation youth. This is evident from statements by members of the Aradhana Committee, volunteers who were instrumental to establishing the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival in 1978. In their bios available from the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival, many members note the importance of the festival to champion North American children and youth of Indian descent to learn and perform Indian classical music and dance. In addition to Srinivasan and Maira's scholarship on South Asian dance practices in the diaspora, Sangita Shresthova's *Is It All About Hips? Around the World with Bollywood Dance* focuses on the South Asian dance practice of Bollywood, and examines how South Asian communities in Los

Angeles, Kathmandu, and Mumbai shape Bollywood dance through their reception and reinterpretation of it. In her study of Bollywood dance in Los Angeles, Shresthova also examines Bharata Natyam training as being a way to fulfill a desire of Indian immigrants who are particularly anxious for their children in America to stay connected to their heritage and traditions. Shresthova further notes that Indian dance instruction refined cultural and physical training stresses spirituality, precise gestures, and complex rhythms. These elements impart knowledge about Indian traditions and rituals to its students, better enabling them to assert their Indianness in American society (2011, 84). The conversations between these authors provides context for examining the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival as a site where festival organizers expand notions of tradition and authenticity through opportunities for Indian American practitioners to stay connected to their heritage and traditions. These opportunities include group and solo performances, awards given to Indian arts practitioners, and the music and dance competitions for second-generation Indian American performers.

Over the span of twelve days, The Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival features approximately fifty performances and workshops all in the service of honoring Thyagaraja and celebrating the Indian classical arts in the US. One of the main events is the *Pancharathnam,* an annual tradition held on the opening weekend of the festival where musicians and devotees pay homage to Thyagaraja by singing his compositions, the *pancharathna krithis* (five jewels), meaning a set of five songs composed by Thyagaraja. In 2019, over 2,000 people attended just the opening weekend to participate in the *Pancharathnam*. The festival also features music and dance performances by artists who have received titles and awards for their contributions to Indian classical arts in the US and abroad. Examples of these titles are: the *Nrithya Rathnakara,* given to an artist who has made fundamental contributions in the field of classical dance through its

performance and propagation; the *Nrithya Seva Rathna,* given to an individual who has made lasting contributions in the field of classical dance through the preservation, promotion and study of the theory and practice of dance, and who are also organizers of dance festivals abroad; and the *Kala Rathna*, an award given to a young person who has made a serious commitment to music or dance through performance and teaching. 2018's Kala Rathna awardee, Aishwarya Balasubramanian, performed a 30-minute solo at the 2019 festival that demonstrated her commitment to preserving and promoting classical dance as she performed standard Bharata Natyam repertoire pieces.

The music and dance competitions also emphasize the preservation, promotion and study of Indian classical arts. Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival volunteers organize an annual Bharata Natyam competition with two categories in which dancers ages fifteen to twenty-five can compete at. In the traditional category, there are three sub-categories. The first sub-category is "invocation," in which participants can perform an invocation piece like a *Pushpanjali, Kauthuvam, Mallari, Thodaya Mangalam*. The second sub-category is "keerthanam," where competition participants perform an *abhinaya* item. And the third category is "varnam," in which students perform a piece that combines the elements of *abhinaya* and *nritta*. Within these three categories, participants can compete in different age groups, sub-junior (9-14), junior, (15-19), and senior (20-25). Then there is an advanced category, that takes place on the last day of the festival for approximately eight hours. Within this category, participants can compete in the "performance," category, where they perform excerpts from repertoire pieces. Participants prepare two options for the *varnam* and two options for the *padam/javali* in advance. The judges select which items the participants perform when they are on stage. The second is the choreography category, where participants choreograph movements to music from Bharata

Natyam repertoire pieces that are given to them the night before the competition. The Bharata Natyam competition plays an important role in the development of Bharata Natyam practice in the diaspora for second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners. The first-place winner of the advanced category receives a one-hour performance slot at the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival, a performance slot in Chennai, and a cash prize for travel to India. Through its different categories and structure (performance and judges' questions), the competition provides a space for increasing the visibility of Bharata Natyam. By competing, second-generation practitioners receive constructive feedback from professional Bharata Natyam artists and may receive invitations for performance opportunities from other US-based Indian classical dance organizations. This space is important for second-generation practitioners as it provides them another avenue to pursue Bharata Natyam beyond their initial training. The competition is also important to first-generation parents as it helps fulfill their desire to have their children in America stay connected to their heritage and traditions.

The Cleveland Thyagaraja Bharata Natyam competition is an important platform for second-generation practitioners to demonstrate their competence as Bharata Natyam performers. I attended the "performance" category portion of the Bharata Natyam competition in April 2019 and the description that follows is my observation of one of the performances. After a brief introduction by one of the festival organizers, a solo dancer walks on stage. Once she reaches the middle of the stage, she pauses waiting for the judges to select the piece she will perform. They select one of the *padam*—a particular type of musical and dance composition—pieces she prepared. She then moves into a *muramandi* position. Her hands are positioned around her face, her right hand in the *shikara* (peak) mudra under her lips, her left hand in *karthari mukha* (scissors) mudra next to her eyes. Her expression shifts between coy and bold as she depicts the

life of a *nayaka* (heroine) and the *nayaka*'s love for the god Krishna. To portray this love, the dancer's full-body *adavus* range from sharp (when directly trying to get the attention of Krishna) to soft and slow (when showcasing the pain the *nayaka* feels when Krishna does not show up to the *nayaka*'s home one evening).

After completing her performance, the dancer took her place in front of the microphone on stage. She directed her focus to the first two rows of the theater, where the judges for the 2019 Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival Bharata Natyam Advanced Competition sat. Both are Bharata Natyam practitioners from India and evaluate dancers on their performances and their responses to the judges' questions that follow these performances. The judges ask their questions based on the specific repertoire pieces that they select for the dancers to perform and can range from having the participant recite and translate a few lines from the composition to having them explain the key characteristics of the piece they performed. The first question one of the judges asked her was what type of *nayaka* she portrayed in the *padam.* She paused for a moment and then answered, "well I think the *nayaka* in this *padam* is very a complicated, strong and confident woman." It was a response that made one of the judges laugh: the question asked the performer to identify which one of the *ashta-nayikas*, meaning eight types of heroines, she portrayed in this *padam*. I was struck by this particular response because instead of identifying the *ashta-nayikas* in her piece, she answered it from her translation of the *padam's* relevance to her contemporary context. It was a question the judges asked to other participants if they performed a *padam* and while a couple of the participants were able to respond, most did not know the answer. This was true of the other popular question the judges asked on the difference between a *padam* and *javali*. Sometimes the judges asked performers if they felt they conveyed the emotion of the piece accurately and often the performer answered that they felt like they tried

their best to and if it didn't come out that way, then they were sorry. The Bharata Natyam competition is a platform for participants to be assessed on their dancing and their ability to provide correct context for the pieces they perform.

The moments of uncertainty and hesitation create spaces where participants challenge the judges' claims of what is important to understand as a Bharata Natyam dancer in the US. The exchange mentioned above in particular signaled to me spaces where second-generation practitioners engage differently with the history and context of Bharata Natyam through what is important to them. I recall Maira's study on how second-generation youth negotiate the collective nostalgia for India (re)created by their parents and their peers. The financial and social success of first-generation immigrants bring out this nostalgia that puts pressure on second-generation youth to be successful and to be "true" Indians according to specific social criteria like watching Hindi films, speaking Indian languages, going to "Indian parties" and socializing with other Indian Americans. Maira examines second-generation youth culture through their practice of re-mixed Bhangra. Maira argues that Indian American youth enjoy bhangra remix because of its hybrid sensibility and "this subculture helps produce a notion of what it means to be cool for a young person in New York, that is reworked into the nostalgia for India yet not seamless with it" (2002, 10). Maira's analysis of the relationship between "home" and "homeland" for first- and second-generation Indian Americans as Bharata Natyam practitioners negotiate issues of representation, multiculturalism, assimilation, and acculturation provides insight into the ways second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners in the moment of answering the judges' questions are reworking their nostalgia for India that is not seamless with it. These moments of uncertainty where participants challenge the judges' claims of what is important to know as Bharata Natyam dancers allows them to negotiate this nostalgia that they

have picked up on from their parents but don't entirely understand on their own, and therefore reframe on their own terms.

As second-generation Indian American competition participants rework their parents' nostalgia for India that is not seamless through their responses to the judges' questions, they are still expected to perform traditional Bharata Natyam pieces. The participants are assessed on their ability to clearly and correctly convey the values and emotions embedded in these Bharata Natyam repertoire pieces. The competition ultimately reflects the overall aim of the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival to preserve and promote Indian classical arts. This aim reflects the importance of Indian classical dance in the South Asian diaspora as a way to fulfill the desire for first-generation parents and teachers to impart Indian cultural roots. The question of how to promote and bring visibility to Indian classical arts in the US is further examined in the other festivals discussed in this chapter, where central to that question is a desire to push the boundaries of Indian traditions and values embedded in classical arts that reflect the social, political, and cultural contexts in which second-generation Indian American practitioners work in.

Drive East Festival: Redefining Tradition

In a 2016 *New York Times* review, critic Gia Kourlas described the Drive East Festival as "a tiny jewel box. Its gems, though, are dazzling" (Kourlas 2016). Other reviews note that the festival is a breath of fresh air that makes classical Indian dance more accessible to understand and experience (*The Indian Panorama* 2016*)*. Established in 2013 in New York City, the Drive East Festival showcases a range of classical Indian performance traditions by artists from the US and India. Due to its popularity, the festival has since expanded to San Francisco and Plano,

Texas. In a video promoting the 2019 Drive East Festival on the YouTube channel ITV Gold, co-founder Sahasra Sambamoorthi emphasizes that the Drive East Festival is "a place to understand the relevance of Indian classical arts in the American context" (ITV Gold, YouTube). Sambamoorthi's statement about understanding the relevance of classical Indian dance in the American context is echoed by other second-generation Indian American practitioners of Bharata Natyam who present work at the Drive East Festival.

The organizers state their commitment to establishing the relevance of classical Indian dance in the US in the "About" section of the festival website, where they write that the "Drive East Festival is one of the most lauded congregations of Indian Classical dance and music outside of India" (driveeast.org). Making the Drive East Festival one of the most lauded Indian classical dance festivals in the US falls within the overall objectives of Navatman, an arts organization Sambamoorthi directs along with classical Indian dance artist, Sridhar Shanmugam, that is committed to fostering a home for Indian classical performing arts in NYC. In my interview with Sambamoorthi, she noted that when she first came up with the idea for Navatman with Shanmugam in 2008, there were no opportunities for Indian dancers. Sambamoorthi's objective in establishing Navatman was to increase performance and employment opportunities in the Indian arts that provides a pathway for artists interested in pursuing Indian dance in the US (Sambamoorthi 2022). While Navatman dedicates the Drive East Festival to showcasing Indian classical arts, the organization also situates this relevance within the social, cultural, and political context of the US. The performances at the festival highlight this point like *Unfiltered*, the piece with which I opened this chapter, which addresses the impact of the #metoo movement on women in the South Asian diaspora through the social, cultural, and political context in which the performers (Sambamoorthi, Thekkek, and Kumar) work and live.

To understand how practitioners frame and promote classical Indian dance in the US, I examine/analyze some definitions and implications of the terms classicism and classical as applied to Indian dance forms. Shobana Jeyasingh's article "Getting off the Orient Express" defines the characteristics of classicism in Bharata Natyam. Jeyasingh is a British South Asian choreographer whose work pushes the boundaries of Bharata Natyam through contemporary movement, staging, and music. In this article, she states that "classicism is often associated with certain golden periods of history where the ground rules were laid down, its aesthetic principles, manners and style are still associated with that art form" (2010, 183). Highlighting how Bharata Natyam emerged as the product of both the pan-Indian, Sanskrit culture, which produced the *Natya Sastra*, and the cultural achievements of the Tanjore court in South India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jeyasingh pinpoints how Bharata Natyam exemplifies classicism because "there are numerous books and treatises dedicated to the analysis of form, to the creation of an appropriate terminology, and to the methodical codification of steps [that] bear witness to the high esteem in which the correct rendering of technique was held" (Jeyasingh 2010, 184). Emphasizing the recognition and importance of classicism in Bharata Natyam is important to Jeyasingh's overall argument that emphasizes the importance of viewing and appreciating Bharata Natyam in the UK in a similar way as audiences view ballet a classical dance form. By explaining the centrality of dance in Bharata Natyam that can be traced back to numerous books and treatises on terminology and the codification of steps, Jeyasingh's article is critical of audiences, dance critics, and dance organizations in the UK that do not recognize Bharata Natyam as a classical dance form on par with ballet (Jeyasingh 2010, 186). In analyzing the leg and arm positions, footwork, training, and performance, Jeyasingh challenges the perception that

Bharata Natyam is an inaccessible, ancient, religious form by providing tools for how to read Bharata Natyam that doesn't place it in opposition to or inferior to ballet.

The desire for Bharata Natyam to be viewed as equal to ballet, modern, or contemporary forms in the US, is echoed by second-generation practitioners as they highlight the stakes for making Bharata Natyam visible through performance opportunities at festivals like the Drive East Festival. In my interview with Bharata Natyam practitioner Sonali Skandan, director of Jiva Performing Arts in New York City, she states that Bharata Natyam is a valid, compelling art form that "stands next to ballet, stands next to modern dance" because it "has structure, it's technique heavy, and it's rigorous." Because of these elements, it should be "side by side by the mainstream art forms such as ballet, so it is valid for Bharata Natyam to be, or any Indian classical dances, for that matter, to be presented at the same kind of level and stature as ballet because it essentially has the same elements to it" (Skandan 2022). Second-generation practitioners wanting Bharata Natyam to be recognized as an important American mainstream dance form highlights the importance of making the form a relevant practice in the US.

In another interview with Bharata Natyam practitioner, Jothika Gorur, her desire for Bharata Natyam to be presented at the same level and stature as ballet, modern, and contemporary extends beyond opportunities at Indian organized events, "but to present Bharata Natyam work at "Western dance organized events" (Gorur 2022). In fact, Jothika notes the struggles that less established second-generation practitioners encounter when applying for Western contemporary dance festivals, and when the only performers who are accepted and invited to perform at these festivals are established Bharata Natyam artists. Returning to Jeyasingh's argument, the importance around recognizing the codified-vocabulary tenets of classical Indian dance not only informs the way festival organizers distinctly use the term

"classical" to frame classical dance festivals, but also informs the ways practitioners frame the term "classical" in their work. The importance of American audiences and festival organizers recognizing Bharata Natyam as a classical form underscores the stakes for second-generation practitioners to make Bharata Natyam visible so it is given the same stature as concert dance forms like ballet, modern, and contemporary dance, that ultimately leads to more classical Indian representation on American concert stages.

The work featured at the Drive East Festival displays the tenets of Indian classical dance while also reworking Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media. For example, the mission statement of the Navatman Dance Company is to "bring extraordinary, boundary-pushing productions to the stage, making Indian classical dance more accessible to understand and experience without removing the beauties of tradition and history that the style has developed from" (driveeast.org). To examine the aesthetic and thematic changes second-generation practitioners make that push the boundaries of classical dance while retaining the tradition of the form, I recall a key question from SanSan Kwan's article "When is Contemporary Dance?" Kwan examines the use of "contemporary" within three dance contexts[16]: concert dance, commercial dance, and world dance,[17] arguing that the term reveals artistic, cultural, and political prejudices (2017, 5). The term "contemporary" when

[16] In the concert dance context, "contemporary" is sometimes defined against both the periods and forms of postmodern and modern, often values process over product, and often experiments with nontraditional spaces and nontraditional spectator-performer relationships. In the commercial dance context, "contemporary" appears as similar to the concert dance context in terms of movement vocabulary, but does not share the same aesthetic and political motivations as concert dance. (Kwan 2017, 7).

[17] In the introduction to *Worlding Dance*, dance scholar Susan Foster's examines how the term world dance "intimates a neutral comparative field wherein all dances are equally important, wonderfully diverse, equivalently powerful cultures." (2009, 2). However, "world dance" has "worked euphemistically to gloss over the colonial legacy of racialized and class-based hierarchizations of the arts (2009, 2). Kwan further acknowledges the implications of using "world dance" when discussing how the term "contemporary" is applied in a world dance context.

applied to world dance contexts becomes seen as a qualifier when not referring to traditional forms or becomes a necessary qualifier to discuss work that comes out of a specific context, otherwise contemporary dance is assumed to be Western. Further, the use of contemporary in the world dance context may emphasize a temporal designation of "newness" or "of the moment," which Kwan finds problematic when affixed to dance forms broadly characterized as African or South Asian, for example. In analyzing the complexities of calling work contemporary in the world dance context, Kwan asks, "how shall we consider practitioners of traditional world dance forms who are innovating within their tradition, without adopting the shapes of Western contemporary dance?" This question highlights the complexities that second-generation practitioners grapple with as they aesthetically and thematically innovate Bharata Natyam through cultural hybridity, while defining and maintaining the genre of Indian classical dance.

The tension between innovation and tradition is important for examining the presentation of classical arts at the Drive East Festival. Anusha Kedhar's *Flexible Bodies: British South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism* analyzes this tension through the impact the language of innovation has on the British South Asian dance scene. Dance companies in the UK who create work that is challenging and innovative secure more government funding, and companies who work within classical idioms and do not engage with Western dance and performance aesthetics receive little funding. The reason for this is that work that does not "explicitly challenge classical frameworks in some way, through a notion of hybridity for example, is considered to be complacent and unoriginal" (Kedhar 2022, 33). In the conversations I had with Bharata Natyam practitioners in the US, they discussed the opposite issue, that it was hard to receive funding if their Bharata Natyam work was innovative. This was because funders did not understand how a practitioner might innovate within a tradition, and they did not understand that innovating within

the tradition means "maybe, perhaps telling new stories or using different ideas and ways to present" (Skandan 2022). Though this has changed in the last fifteen years, second-generation practitioners continue to negotiate the tension between innovation and tradition in labeling their work as classical through the underlying biases they face from funders in the US. Kedhar's analysis on the tension between innovation and tradition in terms of who receives funding is important for examining how second-generation practitioners and festival organizers secure funding to develop Indian classical dance as an accessible and visible practice through platforms like the Drive East Festival.

The aesthetic and thematic changes second-generation practitioners make to the Bharata Natyam repertoire as they rework definitions of classicism in Bharata Natyam were evident at the 2020 Drive East Festival. As venues across the US closed one by one during the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival organizers felt it was important to hold the festival online. In a video that preceded each of the performances, Sambamoorthi stated that "faced with this challenge, we decided to not back down, and not to give up…this year's festival is more important than ever." Their website also stated the importance of holding the festival online. They emphasized that "many turned to the arts for hope and respite, proving its importance now more than ever…as artists, our art gives us the purpose and agency to turn meaningful messages into powerful change" (Navatman 2020). In shifting the festival online, the festival organizers livestreamed fifteen performances from theater venues in six different cities between India and the US (New York City, San Francisco, Chennai, New Delhi, Assam, Bengaluru, and Kolkata). Livestreaming performances from different cities broadened the scope of the festival that challenged audiences to think differently about their understanding of Indian classical arts on a global scale. To livestream from theaters safely, Navatman worked with artists and theaters in different cities to

ensure production protocols were aligned with the recommendations from local government health guidelines. Negotiating the health and safety protocols brought artists in India and the US together, and was one of the many conversations artists who participated in the online Drive East Festival had on the challenges of rehearsing and performing during a global pandemic.

There are three pieces I focus on from the festival that highlight the issues Bharata Natyam practitioners faced in 2020 on racial injustice in the US and the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods as artists. These pieces are important for understanding how second-generation practitioners choreograph and perform their positionalities in reworking Bharata Natyam from within their own generational, political, and cultural context. In 2020, Bharata Natyam practitioners confronted issues of anti-Black racism and casteism in the South Asian community.

The first piece highlighted the Black Lives Matter protests that took place during the summer of 2020. Titled *Tripura: The Path to Destruction*, the Navatman Dance Company performed a piece using the lens of Hindu mythology to explore Lord Shiva's power as the god of destruction. This piece conveyed Lord Shiva's power through *jathis* and *abhinaya* to explore the human psyche, and issues of oppression and silencing to examine how we bring destruction upon ourselves from within. I will focus on one section from the hour-long performance. This section began with four dancers attired in red and gold costumes. They walked on stage cupping their hands to appear as if they were holding candles. For two minutes, they continuously turned and faced different directions while looking down at their hands, as a female solo vocalist sang a Carnatic musical *ragam* or melody along with the faint whisper of a recorded voice saying "remember their names." At the end of the segment, the dancers brought their hands to the floor in unison as if they were placing candles on the ground. In the post-concert Zoom discussion, the members of Navatman Dance Company took questions from their virtual audience to discuss the

themes in their piece. Sambamoorthi explained that the movement was inspired by a meditative exercise Sambamoorthi led during their rehearsals. This exercise was necessary to cope with the anxieties caused by the pandemic and also explore nuances of *abhinaya*. In one rehearsal, the meditation became a way to reflect on the protests that happened at the end of May 2020 in response to the shootings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. She noted that they were all upset to the point where one of their practices ended up being a guided meditation where they lit candles around them and as they moved through the guided meditation led by Sambamoorthi, they picked up each candle to "remember their names," a common saying of the time to remember the names and share the stories of innocent Black lives lost from police brutality and racist civilian attacks. This guided meditation then informed the movements the dancers performed in the piece holding and placing candles on the floor within a piece about Lord Shiva.

Tripura: The Path to Destruction exemplifies the role that second-generation Indian Americans must play in addressing the injustices that Black Americans face in the US and dismantling anti-Blackness in the South Asian diaspora. Through incorporating gestures and dialogue that conveyed the stories of innocent Black lives lost from police brutality and racist civilian attacks, the Navatman Dance Company reworked this specific composition on Shiva's power as the God of destruction, to address racial injustice in the US.

The second piece from the festival addressed anti-Black racism in the South Asian community. Titled *End South Asian Silence*, the piece was inspired by lettersforblacklives.com, a website founded by Asian Americans and Canadians to create a space for open and honest conversations about racial justice, police violence, and anti-Blackness in North American Asian families and communities (n.d.) *End South Asian Silence* opened with dialogue that

acknowledged the sacrifices first-generation Indian parents made when they immigrated to the US for their children to have a better life. A voice then pleas to their first-generation Indian parents and family, arguing that South Asians in the US are "not seen as a threat, that we don't fear for our lives if we are pulled over by the police…however, this is not the case for our Black friends." The voice then stated that there "are many cycles of oppression invisible to the South Asian community" and "our silence has a cost and that we need to talk about it." The voiceover urged the South Asian community to "listen, vote, and protest" to overcome our silence. To emphasize each line of the letter, the video cuts between dancers Thekkek, Kumar, Sambamoorthi, Shruthi Abhishek, Aishwarya Subramanian, Priyanka Raghuraman, and Tanu Sreedharan performing in their respective homes, translating the lines through Bharata Natyam *mudras*. The dancers convey "silence" by placing their hands over their mouths using the *pathaka* (literal translation: flag) gesture, which they form by keeping all fingers straight and together, and bending the thumb so that it touches the end of the index finger. They convey "cycles of oppression" by circles their hands around one another in *kartari mukha* (literal translation: scissors). (Figures 2.1 and 2.2) Some of the dancers utilized their whole body to convey the lines of the letter and other dancers only used *mudras* and *abhinaya*. This piece along with *Tripura: The Path to Destruction* highlights the stakes for second-generation practitioners as they continue to think about their positionalities as Indian Americans and issues that need to be addressed. Second-generation practitioners address these issues to grow Bharata Natyam practice beyond its traditional repertoire that conveys their experiences of growing up in the US.

Figure 2.1: Still from *End South Asian Silence*. Screenshot from Nava Dance Theatre "End South Asian Silence | Bharatanatyam Collaboration." [August 2020]. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caKR-nA_XU8**. Accessed September 12, 2020.

Figure 2.2: Still from *End South Asian Silence*. Screenshot from Nava Dance Theatre "End South Asian Silence | Bharatanatyam Collaboration." [August 2020]. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caKR-nA_XU8**. Accessed September 12, 2020.

Tripura: The Path to Destruction and *End South Asian Silence* emphasized the importance for second-generation practitioners to address racial injustice in the US because

many felt that the South Asian community is complicit in anti-Black racism through the pervasive issue of colorism and the model minority myth. Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk* provides the necessary context for analyzing the urgency practitioners feel to address anti-Black racism in the South Asian community. To examine how *desis*, a term meaning a person of South Asian birth or descent who lives outside of South Asia, "participate in anti-Black racism given the racism that they also experience," he unpacks the "model minority" myth (2000, 171). The "model minority" myth implies that some cultural minorities are able through their own efforts to be socially mobile, whereas others seem to be unable to do so without support. This myth does not take into account structural racism in the US. Prashad states that the model minority stereotype is a "godsend for desis" because it provides them with an avenue toward advancement, despite its negative impact on Black communities and its strengthening of white supremacy (2000, 170). Prashad answers the question of why desis participate in anti-Black racism by further examining how these notions may be situated in the complexity of the caste system. Prashad cites the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, where he notes that Asian entry into the US was used in direct opposition to Black Americans through the "model minority" myth. The dancers in *End South Asian Silences* address their first-generation parents and family who immigrated to the US after 1965, and by pleading their family to recognize that they are complicit in anti-Black racism through their silence and invisible cycles of oppression, they are also challenging the "model minority" myth. *Tripura: The Path to Destruction*'s and *End South Asian Silence*'s messages of speaking up against and protesting anti-Black racism in the South Asian community demonstrate that second-generation youth do not find the model minority category useful in their social lives and are committed to building solidarity with Black Americans (Prashad 2000, 170). *Tripura: The Path to Destruction* and *End*

South Asian Silence are pieces that challenge the South Asian community to engage in dialogue and be more active in critiquing and dismantling anti-Black racism in the diaspora.

The second issue second-generation practitioners addressed at the Drive East Festival was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the professional lives of classical Indian dance and music artists around the world. In post-concert conversations, panels, and online content that each artist recorded explaining their pieces and how they were dealing with the effects of being quarantined in India and the US, a key issue that emerged centered around the future of Bharata Natyam practice in the US and India. How does having an online platform open up more opportunities for Bharata Natyam practitioners? What are the challenges of staging and rehearsing pieces over Zoom? Does the accessibility of Bharata Natyam online somehow devalue the practice of Bharata Natyam as teaching and performance techniques shift to adapt to the online platform? The last question was already being asked pre-pandemic as Bharata Natyam dancers negotiated the identity of the practice in the twenty-first century. Some practitioners are concerned that the form will lose its essence if it is not experienced live. I believe that the online platform provides a way to closely observe the intricacies and complexities of Bharata Natyam that enhances the experience of viewing the form. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the responses to these questions as the spaces where Bharata Natyam dancers have practiced and performed in like studios, religious spaces like Hindu temples, and some proscenium stages, were temporarily inaccessible.

Rama Vaidyanathan and her daughter, Dakshina, choreographed and performed a piece at the festival that addressed the impact of COVID-19. Livestreaming their performance from the Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts in New Delhi, their piece explored the effect the lockdowns in India had on a city with heavy pollution like New Delhi. To quote from their

introduction, their piece "respond[s] to and explore[s] nature as it reaps the benefits of a world that has been forced to slow down." Each segment of their piece began with a title card that explored a different element. For example, the first segment opened with the sound of waves while a title card displayed a message about healing the earth through a poem in praise of Vishnu, the god of preservation. The movements conveyed the message in the title card through *abhinaya* that depicted Vishnu, interspersed with *nritta* or pure movement sequences. The rest of the segments further explored different elements through stories related to Vishnu. Rama and Dakshina Vaidyanathan's performance explored the realities of performing during the pandemic while also exploring the possibilities the online medium has opened up for them in terms of making their work visible, and the tangible effects the lockdowns were having on the cities they were performing from. This piece highlighted the global nature of this festival to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To enhance the online experience of attending the festival, the organizers provided behind-the-scenes content by having each artist upload videos that discussed their thoughts on the arts in our current moment and explanations of their pieces. Following each performance was a post-concert discussion via a Zoom link sent out by organizers, where audience members could virtually meet and hear more about the artists' works. On the second weekend of the festival, the organizers held four "state of the arts" talks where members of the classical Indian dance community talked extensively about the current challenges and issues that classical Indian artists are facing working during a global pandemic, the role of politics in classical Indian arts, and the circulation of classical Indian dance forms in the diaspora. The townhall discussions along with the performances, post-concert discussions, and behind the scenes content all highlighted the stakes for second-generation Indian American practitioners to make Bharata Natyam a relevant

practice in the US as they reimagine Bharata Natyam practice within racial injustices and inequalities in the US. Further, the performances and conversations at the 2020 Drive East Festival highlighted second-generation practitioner's concerns about the relevance of Bharata Natyam in our current time and a post-pandemic future.

Erasing Borders: A "Border-less" Festival

Hosted by the Indo-American Arts Council, the Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance is an annual festival held in New York City that showcases classical and contemporary Indian dance artists from India and the US. The Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance is an important platform for second-generation practitioners to challenge the boundaries of different Indian classical and modern dance forms by presenting original works in multiple or new vocabularies and forms deriving from or relating to Indian dance traditions and/or works that are challenging or critically thinking on their own terms (IAAC 2020). In its twelfth year, the IAAC moved the festival online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They highlighted this decision in their 2020 festival invitations for applications:

> In late 2019 and early 2020 Erasing Border Dance Festival planned to have a "normal" presentation of varied and wonderful performers in 2020 at Alvin Ailey Citigroup Theatre on Sept 27. But like the rest of the world, we too got humbled by the global pandemic. Even as our curators kept planning and selecting from a fabulous pool of artists, we kept checking the performing arts industry and hoping for crucial decision, guidance, a flattened curve and a back-to-normal life. That is still to happen. In mid-June we decided to move the festival online. This has its own artistic challenges, but we

> believe it also opens up many possibilities. Our artists this year are from across the world, representing many of India's dance forms, and bringing them together on an online platform was the most responsible and the most exciting way of showcasing their work. We hope you enjoy! (IAAC 2020)

In an article on the *Broadway World* website, festival director Deepsikha Chatterjee emphasized the importance of moving the festival to an online format in 2020, stating that "…bringing our artists together on an online platform was not only the most responsible and exciting way of showcasing their work but also displaying the virtuosity of diversity" (Rabinowitz 2020). As Chatterjee further noted, the Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance for the "first time featured eleven artists trained in Indian dance forms from across the world will be brought together in a virtual borderless festival" (Rabinowitz 2020). Festivals in previous years featured mostly US-based artists across different Indian classical dance genres. In another interview, Chatterjee noted that she, along with other festival organizers in previous years wanted to expand the scope of the festival to feature more artists from India, "hoping for a world where artists can train and perform across genres and in different nations without too many restrictions" (Rabinowitz 2020). The online format broadened the scope of the festival to include artists who had previously been denied artist visas or it may have been too expense for them to travel to and stay in New York City, thus enabling new ways for the festival to be inclusive. The virtual format also shifted the ways Indian dance works were curated to be presented online as many of the featured performers were not familiar with how best to film their work. To familiarize performers with performing virtually, the festival organizers created a document that included pointers like how to set up lighting, or the type of backdrop to perform against (Rabinowitz 2020). In curating the guidelines

for performing virtually, festival organizers also broadened the possibilities of where Indian dance performances can take place by inviting artists to perform outside a theater venue. The call for the 2020 Erasing Borders Festival highlighted the challenges Indian dance artists faced in 2020 in terms of how to shift from live to virtual performances. The 2020 festival once it took place online underscored the potential of virtual festivals as more inclusive as artists all over the world could be featured without having to face travel restrictions. The two performances I focus on in this section highlighted the ways second-generation Indian artists addressed the festival invitation in their works, representing the challenges of being an artist in 2020 and the importance of addressing current cultural and social issues as Indian dance practitioners.

The first piece focused on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic was having on the professional lives of classical Indian dance and music artists around the world by showcasing the challenges of staging pieces virtually. Divyaa Unni, a performer and teacher based in Houston, performed a piece in praise of the Goddess Kalika, the goddess of power, destruction, and change, in varying outside venues in the Houston area. She began her piece on a smooth dirt surface, against the backdrop of a pond. Unni maintained the sharp diagonal lines with her arms, *mudras* blooming between *kathakamuka* and *alapadma* (lotus), while maintaining *aramandi*. In the middle of her piece, the backdrop and surface she danced on changed. Unni's *adavus* became more direct and sharper as she performed on a concrete surface in front of a mural of a man wearing a mask. Towards the end of her piece, the backdrop changed a third time with her dancing in a different park in front of a large, outdoor stage that had sound equipment on it. Unni's movements slowed down to convey tranquility that depicted creation and change after destruction. Unni's piece highlighted the use of Bharata Natyam technique set to a traditional

composition to convey the cultural realities of the present moment. Unni's contemporary cultural context was emphasized through the different outdoor spaces in which she performed.

In an interview after the show, the interviewers asked Unni about the challenges of performing outdoors in the midst of a pandemic. She noted that while there were challenges in terms of surfaces as dancing Bharata Natyam on the dirt, concrete, or grass is difficult, she felt more comfortable performing in outdoor spaces that were unconventional for performing Bharata Natyam. She also felt more comfortable not performing for an audience. Performing outdoors away from an audience allowed Unni to connect to the movement on a spiritual level. Unni's online performance showcased the nuances of Bharata Natyam *abhinaya* or expression through closeup shots. Audience members applauded the subtlety of her expression in the Facebook live chat, typing in their appreciation for her performance, noting that they were able to experience Indian classical dance as they had not previously because they could see the expressions and gestures more clearly online. This response to Unni's performance demonstrated one possibility of the online platform for audiences and Bharata Natyam practitioners to access and showcase Bharata Natyam techniques in more detail.

The second piece focused on anti-Black racism in the US. Arun Mathai's performance examined the issue of inclusivity in the Bharata Natyam community by addressing the Black Lives Matter Movement. Mathai performed a solo piece *Shivoham* that was choreographed by Rama Vaidyanathan with music composed by GS Rajan. *Shivoham* was a composition on the Hindu god, Shiva. Mathai, a Bharata Natyam practitioner based in Los Angeles, California, who is currently the principal dancer of Blue 13 Dance Company, a contemporary Indian dance company, wanted to perform a piece on Shiva, who "creates and destroys and destroys to create" (Mathai 2020). Mathai's piece examines how humans grapple with the balance of creation and

destruction in our lives. Through the theme of balancing creation and destruction, Mathai wanted to address the Black Lives Matter Movement and the urgency of our current moment to "destroy," to dismantle oppressive systems that are necessary for the creation of equitable systems. Wearing a red kurta with black pants, Mathai performed his piece outside against the backdrop of a Black Lives Matter mural. The Black Lives Matter slogan was painted in white against a black painted backdrop. Mathai danced the Shiva piece on the sidewalk in front of the Black Lives Matter mural. He emphasized the themes of creation and destruction in the rigor and the speed of the *adavus* performed when portraying Shiva like leg lifts at a diagonal, forceful stomping, and direct arm placements. The piece concluded with Mathai's arms stretched out high looking towards the sky and as the video faded to black, the following message appeared: "Dedicated to the BIPOC lives that have been stolen." This piece directly confronts the importance of making Bharata Natyam a relevant practice for addressing social injustices in the US. to promote a more inclusive Bharata Natyam community in the US. In performing Bharata Natyam for social justice, second-generation practitioners promote a more inclusive Bharata Natyam community in the US.

Dismantling and Decentering Casteism in Bharata Natyam

The conversations at the Drive East and Erasing Borders festivals addressed the question of how Bharata Natyam can be a tool for social justice. Central to this discussion was confronting the erasure of hereditary practitioners in the development of Bharata Natyam as a classical form and how second-generation practitioners can and should do more to highlight the work of hereditary practitioners. At the Town Hall discussion on the last day of Drive East, festival co-directors Sambamoorthi and Sridhar Shanmugam, a Bharata Natyam practitioner,

addressed questions regarding the process of moving the festival online, the challenges of this process, and the responsibility of the arts during this time. They also received questions from participants asking about the ways Bharata Natyam practitioners and organizations take responsibility for the systemic oppression within the classical dance community, making space and giving voice to hereditary practitioners, and what resources and reparations do hereditary practitioners get from Bharata Natyam practitioners' appropriation of their form. These questions opened up a conversation for practitioners' to acknowledge their role in marginalizing hereditary practitioners, but also opened up a dilemma that second-generation practitioners' face: how do you reconcile Bharata Natyam's history of appropriation, marginalization, and oppression with the realities of practicing and making this form your livelihood in the US? The responses did not present solutions for reconciling this dilemma, but thought through the politics of representation, of wanting to include more hereditary practitioners' voices in their work, but also recognizing that hereditary practitioner do not want anything to do with the current state of Bharata Natyam and do not trust present-day Bharata Natyam practitioners. In a conversation before his performance at the virtual Erasing Borders Festival, Mathai also expressed the importance of having conversations about the appropriation of the art form from hereditary dancers, in order to truly think about Bharata Natyam as a tool for social justice. The conversations at these festivals highlight that while second-generation practitioners are addressing the marginalization and erasure of hereditary practitioners in the development of Bharata Natyam, that there is still work to be done to dismantle Indian classical dance's casteism.

To address the marginalization and erasure of hereditary practitioners, it is important for second-generation practitioners to interrogate the development of Bharata Natyam as a classical dance form. Anusha Kedhar's article "It is Time for a Caste Reckoning in Indian 'Classical'

Dance" examines Bharata Natyam dancers' complicity in the oppression and marginalization of hereditary practitioners. Kedhar notes that the Indian "classical" dance world is not immune from casteism (meaning prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of caste), yet has been silent on the way caste pervades and shapes it (2020, 16). To undo Indian classical dance's casteism is not just about knowing the history of appropriation, but about dismantling mechanisms and structure.

Kedhar's article provides concrete steps for dismantling casteism in Bharata Natyam and how to represent the marginalization of hereditary practitioners in classical Indian dance practices. Kedhar proposes the following: 1) to listen to, not speak for, dancers from hereditary dance communities by uplifting and amplifying their voices; 2) to stop perpetuating the rescue narrative that positions Brahmins as saviors of a "dying" art form and to talk about this narrative in terms of appropriation, not revival; 3) acknowledging caste privilege and calling out Brahmin fragility, 4) increasing the representation of dancers from hereditary and caste-oppressed communities while also understanding the reasons these dancers might choose not to dance; 5) interrogating choreographic and representational practices; 6) reallocating resources and capital to address caste and class inequities; 7) having a serious conversation about reparations and addressing the enduring social and economic consequences of cultural appropriation on hereditary dance communities (2020, 17). As the conversations deepen on how to represent the work of hereditary practitioners and Bharata Natyam dancers' complicity in the oppression and marginalization of hereditary practitioners, these points, this call to action, provides the necessary framework to analyze the aesthetic and thematic changes second-generation practitioners to Bharata Natyam make like acknowledging caste privilege in reworking traditional compositions and choreographies.

The conversations at the 2020 festivals demonstrated a desire to decenter Bharata Natyam by representing the work of hereditary practitioners to make it a more accessible and inclusive practice. In these conversations, practitioners acknowledged how caste informs their Indian American identities, when they previously thought it had no bearing on their day to day lives in the US, and how caste was taught through their Bharata Natyam training and continues to be integral to their performance. In the Town Hall discussion at the Drive East festival, one participant stated that unfortunately, they think that the issue of casteism in Bharata Natyam is not going to be solved by this generation (most of the participants were Gen X and Millennials). Which raises the question, why not? There are also conversations I had with practitioners who feel that while discussing casteism in Bharata Natyam is important, they feel that it is still important to practice Bharata Natyam because they are fighting to be seen as a brown-skinned person in this country. Practicing Bharata Natyam is important for increasing South Asian representation in the US. Second-generation practitioners not acknowledging caste in their work continues to bear the same consequences of marginalization and exclusion that are hoping to transform in reworking Bharata Natyam techniques, themes, and compositions. Second-generation practitioners not acknowledging caste contradicts the desire make Bharata Natyam a more accessible and inclusive practice in the US.

Conclusion

US-based festivals provide spaces for second-generation practitioners to challenge and transform Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, tradition, and nationalism. The growing presence of South Asian communities in the US after 1965 catalyzed/engendered the emergence of the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana, Drive East, and Erasing Borders festivals.

Dance played an important role in these communities that helped second-generation practitioners grow and make visible classical Indian dance in the US. With the emergence and popularity of US-based festivals, second-generation practitioners navigate staying connected to their cultural heritage through making Bharata Natyam inclusive and accessible to American audiences in the South Asian diaspora. US-based festivals are important platforms for second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners to produce work that this critical of their connection to India as they challenge and push against the boundaries of different Indian classical and modern dance forms through contemporary issues and media. In 2020, second-generation practitioners addressed anti-Black racism in the South Asian community by creating work that critiqued South Asian communities for being complicit in their silence and to speak up and protest the police brutality and racist civilian attacks that Black Americans experience. Second-generation practitioners also had conversations that acknowledged their caste privilege in practicing Bharata Natyam that calls into question their desire to make Bharata Natyam inclusive and accessible to diverse audiences in the US.

The conversation at many of the 2020 festivals centered on the different ways second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners were navigating the COVID-19 pandemic to continue performing and presenting work at online festivals. In comparing the 2019 and 2020 festivals, I noticed a conversation shift. When I watched some of the concert conversations from 2019's Drive East and Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance, the conversation centered around the importance of preserving classical dance in the US. At a post-performance discussion from the 2019 Drive East festival, the participants had a long discussion around the importance of growing classical dance in the US. Some of the responses ranged from a desire to preserve Bharata Natyam to assert South Asian American identity in the US because it is an identity that

is marginalized. Other responses were critical of this desire as they addressed contemporary themes and technique to incorporate into classical dance that breaks up the problematic narratives that are transmitted through Bharata Natyam practice. As second-generation practitioners presented work and held discussions on the relevance of Bharata Natyam in the US in 2020, these conversations centered on anti-Black racism and casteism within the Bharata Natyam community in the US and India and the responsibility of South Asian artists to address these issues. The shift in tone from 2019's conversation on discussing innovation in Indian classical dance highlighted the moment of 2020 where South Asian artists felt they could no longer be silent about these issues as to be silent is to be complicit. The shift to explicitly addressing issues of anti-Black racism and casteism in Bharata Natyam within the South Asian community was a necessary shift as second-generation practitioners continue to become more vocal about their positionalities and cultural experiences of growing up and living in the US and to keep and expand Bharata Natyam as a relevant practice within the contemporary American social context.

Right after conducting research on the Drive East Festival and Erasing Borders: Festival of Dance in 2020, I was curious about the future of online platforms given that festival organizers were excited about connecting with audiences from all over the world who could access content at times that worked for their schedules. Will these festivals move into some hybrid version, given the success of the online formats for the Drive East and Erasing Borders Festival? For the Chennai Music and Dance Season, will the "real" season return at the end of 2021 or 2022? In the summer of 2021, my first question was answered as the organizers of Drive East held their 10th annual festival in a hybrid format. If you were an audience member based in NYC, you had the option to buy tickets and attend in-person at the La Mama Theater. To attend,

audience members had to provide proof of vaccination and adhere to the guidelines of wearing a mask while in person. If you were unable to attend in person (like me), you had the option to watch the online broadcast. All concerts were made available 24 hours after they premiered. Experiencing the hybrid festival was different from the online only one from 2020, as less content was made available to you if watching the online broadcast. However, the online experiences afforded viewers like myself to observe Bharata Natyam from many different and close-up angles and get glimpses of the in-person audience watching the performance from certain camera angles.

The theme of Drive East 2021 was "Becoming a Conscious Artist." As the festival organizers stated:

> Artists evolve as we move forward in our careers, and as we ask our artists of this year what it is to be a conscious artists, we realize there is no singular answer. Each artist is focused on various aspects sharing their choreography process to new artists, preserving lineage and traditions, and opening up traditions that are normally closed off. What is consistent however is that every conscious artist is thinking about how they will impact the field around them, and why it is necessary. This year we explore what it is to become a conscious artist, and the myriad of questions and paths an artist takes to distill this vision into action as they grow. (driveeast.org)

Delving deeper into what it means to be a conscious artist is an important theme for second-generation practitioners as they continue to explore the possibilities that opened up during the COVID-19 pandemic for presenting and receiving Bharata Natyam performances. These

possibilities will further contribute to the aesthetic and thematic changes second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners make as they transform Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, tradition, and nationalism to make Bharata Natyam an accessible, relevant practice in the US. In the next chapter, I continue to examine these changes by analyzing the importance of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for second-generation practitioners to present their work and rework the aesthetic boundaries of Bharata Natyam through their interpretations of Bharata Natyam repertoire pieces.

Chapter Three

Going "Viral": The Role of Competition Platforms for Second-Generation Bharata Natyam Performances

Introduction

I first discovered IndianRaga in 2013 when I was researching music to use for my MFA thesis project. IndianRaga is an Indian arts collective based out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston. I was looking for recordings that combined Indian musical styles (Carnatic or Hindustani) with other genres because I wanted the music to reflect my cultural hybridity as a second-generation Indian American. I was excited when I first listened to their music because they fused Carnatic music with American popular songs. IndianRaga's content currently impacts my practice, especially my pedagogy, because I use their songs to teach Bharata Natyam to university students who are unfamiliar with the form. Teaching Bharata Natyam movements to Carnatic versions of "Closer" by The Chainsmokers (featuring Halsey) and "Mi Gente," by J Balvin and Willy William, helped me connect the movement vocabulary, which is new to my students, to their familiarity with these songs. IndianRaga's content enables me to highlight the relevance—as embedded in American culture—of Indian classical dance in the contemporary context as I negotiate my cultural identity through Bharata Natyam practice.

In this chapter, I examine the role online organizations like IndianRaga play in providing spaces for second-generation practitioners to rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media from within their own generational, political, and cultural context in the US. I argue that second-generation Indian American dancers challenge and transform traditional Indian cultural attitudes (passed on to them by their first-generation Bharata Natyam teachers) through cultural hybridity. In Chapter 2, I argued that the desire to transform Indian cultural attitudes stems from a desire to make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice, which second-generation practitioners articulate as making work that audiences within and outside the South Asian diaspora in the US can connect to and understand more easily if they are unfamiliar with the form. In this chapter, I continue to examine this desire for second-generation practitioners to make Bharata Natyam more visible and accessible to audiences in different parts of the world through more performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam dancers to showcase their work. IndianRaga, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, provide tools for second-generation practitioners to rework Bharata Natyam themes and compositional elements that increase the visibility of classical Indian dance practices, leading to more professional performance opportunities. Within this discussion, I also analyze the popularity of in-person and online competitions to further highlight how second-generation Indian American practitioners manifest cultural hybridity through choreography, music, costumes, and set designs. Further, as these platforms make Bharata Natyam more visible to different audiences around the world, with competition organizers' goal to develop Bharata Natyam dancers into professional artists, second-generation practitioners fuse different musical and dance styles to address specific themes and issues that are relevant to their lives in the 21st century.

While I argue that second-generation practitioners use online platforms and competitions to develop Bharata Natyam in the US, I also examine the implications of making Bharata Natyam a forum for competition platforms. There are application fees for second-generation practitioners to participate in these online channels and competitions as spaces for reworking Bharata Natyam practice. Organizers and second-generation practitioners often do not acknowledge their class status in their ability to access Bharata Natyam or make it more available to wide audience. Further, as second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam on these platforms, they also bring attention to Indian nationalism[18] that conflates India with its spiritual accomplishments in the in the diaspora in their promotional material, the events at which they perform, and the ways they label their work once they receive a lot of views and "likes" on videos they upload to Instagram or TikTok. I examine the tension between wanting to challenge Indian cultural attitudes (caste, class, gender, religion, and nationalism) and reinforcing these viewpoints in their work. Increasing Bharata Natyam's visibility and legibility in the American context leads to more second-generation practitioners pursuing Bharata Natyam professionally as a viable career path.

An event that presses upon my analysis of online platforms and competitions is the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic, during which I completed most of my research and writing for this chapter and which has redefined how dance circulates online. As I examine how second-generation practitioners rework the aesthetic and thematic boundaries of Bharata Natyam, I also analyze how second-generation practitioners are responding to the pandemic through their work,

[18] *In At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*, O'Shea notes that this nationalism that conflates India with spiritual accomplishments, is specifically conflating India to a "pure" casteist Hindu heritage expressed through the Sanskrit scriptural tradition "that celebrates an ancient, elite past as the foundation of the present-day (Indian) nation (2007, 72)

as I demonstrated in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I show how the pandemic has impacted the circulation and reception of Bharata Natyam in the US as second-generation practitioners participate in the global online circulation of Bharata Natyam through online competitions and social media platforms.

The Popularity of Online Bharata Natyam: IndianRaga

The first time I encountered the popularity of IndianRaga was when I watched a YouTube video titled "EDM Alarippu: Bharata Natyam." It was 2016 and though I had known about the organization for three years already, I really had not seen their dance choreography. "*Tha the*, *the yum that tha*, *kita thaka tha the*..." As a recorded voice recites the *sollakattu*, three dancers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five punctuate the rhythm sharply by shifting only their eyes first to the right, then left, up, down and straight. They stand in a triangle formation, wearing black tops with black *shalwars* or loose trousers. The two female-presenting dancers wear pink and purple *sari* material covering their chests and hips, while the male-presenting dancer wears a gold sash around his neck and purple *sari* material that covers his hips. The dancers further mark their identities with gender-specific poses: the male dancer begins in *samapadam* or standing position with his hands on his hips, while the women pose in *samapadam* with the backs of their hands on their waists. "*Tha the, the yum tha, kita thaka tha the*…" The dancers shift through a series of isolations at different levels (from *samapadam* to *aramandi* to *muramandi*) with their eyes, necks, and shoulders. Once the *sollakattu* increases in speed, the dancers' *adavus* become more intricate and spatially direct as they migrate from the triangle formation into a diagonal line (and then at the end returning to the triangle formation standing in *samapadam*). I was struck first by the dancers' movements because I recognized

them from the *alarippu*,[19] the composition they were performing, and second by the musical accompaniment that combined Carnatic music and Electronic Dance Music or EDM, a genre of music made largely for nightclubs, raves, and festivals. By setting a Bharata Natyam composition to EDM, these dancers showcased sharper *adavus* that highlighted the intersection of these two distinct musical genres. The combination of these two musical genres enables Bharata Natyam to reach a wider audience, thus making it more easily legible to audiences outside of the South Asian diaspora as evidenced by the 2.6 million views to date.

"EDM Alarippu: Bharata Natyam" demonstrates IndianRaga's aim to make the classical Indian arts accessible to aspiring dancers in different South Asian communities and audiences outside the diaspora in terms of cross-cultural understanding and broad circulation. More specifically, IndianRaga's objective is to provide aspiring artists a platform to explore their talent through opportunities that focus on producing high-quality media and developing skills to collaborate with fellow artists working in classical and contemporary styles of music and dance (IndianRaga, n.d.). The classical and contemporary styles include but are not limited to: classical (styles whose theory and practice can be traced to the *Natya Shastra*), semi-classical (a combination of classical and folk dance), contemporary (experiments of existing classical and folk forms) and fusion (the combination of different styles to create a new aesthetic). "EDM Alarippu: Bharata Natyam" is one of many examples on the IndianRaga YouTube channel that highlights the blending of classical and contemporary styles through music, dance, and other staging elements like costumes and set designs, through clear and well-produced videos.

[19] Translating to "flowering bud," the *alarippu* is traditionally the first dance piece that Bharata Natyam dancers learn. It is often performed at the beginning of the recital and can be set to any five *jaatis* (*chatusra, tisra, khanda, misra or sangeerna*), using *sollukattu* syllables. The *alarippu* is an example of a *nritta* piece because it does not involve expression.

In this section, I examine how IndianRaga has become one of the most popular online channels globally as "100 million people have watched [their] videos that showcase 3,000 artists and 250 IndianRaga Fellows from 40 global cities [they] present their work in" (IndianRaga, n.d.). In October 2022, "EDM Alarippu" has been viewed approximately 2.5 million times. Their most watched Bharata Natyam video, "Shiva Shambho," has been viewed 18 million times (October 2022). Dance and music videos are posted daily as the channel continues to grow in its program offerings. Examining the popularity of IndianRaga is important to understanding the role of online spaces for second-generation practitioners to rework Bharata Natyam techniques, themes, and compositions.

IndianRaga as a channel for increasing the visibility and relevance of classical Indian arts began in 2012. Sriram Emani proposed and developed IndianRaga during his graduate studies at MIT as part of his master's thesis and a grant he received from the Council for the Arts at MIT (Camit). In a TedXChennai talk, "When Classical goes Viral," Emani discussed his motivations for establishing IndianRaga. Emani, himself a trained Carnatic musician, noticed that Indian people generally don't talk about or bond over the Indian classical arts in the same way they may over a popular Bollywood film song. Indian classical arts are not popular because the music and dance composition "lyrics are written in ancient versions of languages that we don't speak anymore, most of the themes are set in a time and context that we just can't relate to in the 21st century, the pieces are usually long and slow, and the audio and video quality of existing recordings is quite dull compared to the cinematic experiences of new videos" (Emani 2018). In Chapter 2, I discussed how festival organizers used the term "classical" when curating and promoting US-based Indian classical dance festivals. Theorists Prarthana Purkayastha and Alessandra Lopez y Royo both address the implications of the term "classical" as they

interrogate how these forms were linked with the nationalist project of rediscovering and reclaiming India's past that began in the late nineteenth century. Purkayastha states that the adoption of the term "classical" demonstrates the research Indian cultural reformists and revivalists sought through pre-colonial, ancient texts and indigenous movements to highlight a "unique and unsullied past" (2014, 10). Lopez y Royo states that Indian classical dance has been part of a wider project aimed at the "re-making and re-shaping of Indian culture, which coincided with establishing the post-independence Indian nation and new ideas of Indianness" (Lopez y Royo 2003, 150). Emani's comments highlight these implications because he questioned why classical Indian dance and music forms are not as popular or relevant in our present context.

One of Emani's reasons for developing IndianRaga was to validate the relevance of Indian classical arts in order to bridge generational divides to approaching and appreciating classical dance. To do so, he started by asking the following questions: "How do we deconstruct and appreciate the nuances of classical art forms so that younger audiences will want to listen to it? How do we hold audiences' attention across generations if there are so many barriers to accessing classical dance? How do we create something that is readily appealing and enjoyable to multiple generations?" To answer these questions, Emani embarked on a research project where he stayed at fifty different homes across North America to understand how classical Indian arts can be appealing to and enjoyable for multiple generations staying in one household. In one particular household, he saw a grandfather and his grandson bonding over a pop song rhythm. This observation led Emani to think about how different genres of music can exist alongside one another by asking: How do pop songs co-exist with classical music and dance? What is the effect that "spicing up" Western songs (Indian classical style) can have on transmission and accessibility of the Indian classical arts across multiple generations? These

questions led to the production of IndianRaga's first videos that set Carnatic music to the melodies of pop songs, Sia's "Cheap Thrills" and Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You." These videos became instant hits ("Cheap Thrills" has 12 million views and "Shape of You" has 8 million views since August 2022). As the views and likes started to accumulate in bringing more visibility to classical Indian music and dance, Emani noted that the questions he sought in building this platform were being answered as his friends shared stories of their parents and grandparents enjoying IndianRaga's viral videos. The development of fusion pieces and the popularity of IndianRaga's videos highlights the importance of IndianRaga's platform to reach and connect new and older audiences across multiple generations in India and the diaspora.

The development of fusion pieces makes the classical Indian arts more legible to younger practitioners interested in learning Indian dance and music IndianRaga's role in introducing kids to the classical arts is emphasized on the website, where it is stated that while many parents and older adults are rediscovering their passion for the classical arts, a large number of kids watch these videos and in fact, start their journey into the classical arts with IndianRaga. IndianRaga's aim of introducing a new generation to Indian classical arts has led to the development of multiple programs that generate content for appreciating classical Indian dance and music.

To highlight IndianRaga's global reach for making the classical Indian arts relevant in today's context, I closely examine their fellowship (and briefly touch on their jams program) and competition programs. IndianRaga states on their website that their fellowship and jams programs provide opportunities for practitioners to "…collaborate with fellow aspiring artists to perform and present pieces effectively, and produce high-quality videos that are featured on the IndianRaga social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram)" (Indian Raga, n.d.). The fellowship program is specifically for advanced artists and only those that participate as

IndianRaga fellows are invited to perform at live concerts and workshops. The jam program is a little more informal in nature with applicants having the opportunity to select the group they would like to collaborate with (the group consists of 4-6 dancers). Participants in the jam program work with an IndianRaga mentor to brainstorm ideas, put together a structure for a piece, and film the piece for YouTube. Participants in the jam program don't have the same performance opportunities as fellowship participants. Ultimately, the Raga jam program is considered to be a stepping stone for participants to become IndianRaga fellows. While the application process and some of the direct benefits for participating in each program differ, ultimately both programs provide mentorship for Bharata Natyam practitioners to develop their skills as performers, choreographers, collaborators, and producers. Second-generation practitioners who participate in these programs perform and produce videos, which, I argue, reflect their experiences of living in the Indian diaspora. Participating in these programs also leads to professional performance opportunities.

IndianRaga's dance-focused fellowship is central to the channel in providing second-generation practitioners opportunities for producing innovative Bharata Natyam work. IndianRaga started the dance fellowship in 2016 and is open to all age groups and genres. A creative panel or designated expert mentors fellows as they move through the process of collaboration and producing videos. Their website lists specific benefits for participating in the IndianRaga fellowship program that they have heard through feedback from previous fellowship participants. The first is recognition that comes from being featured to an audience of over a million subscribers across IndianRaga's YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram accounts. The opportunities that come from this recognition are invitations to perform at prestigious live concerts (these are paid performance opportunities). The second is the learning experience that

comes from creating successful pieces for a digital audience, and developing critical skills related to audio and video production. The third benefit is credibility in that being a Raga fellow is a stamp of excellence and innovation in the Indian performing arts. This stamp of excellence is noticed by concert organizers, teachers, and audiences which highlights the fourth benefit, networking and contact building. Being an IndianRaga fellow also has further long term benefits as fellows can reapply and return to produce more collaborations. Some of these benefits for returning fellows expand on the initial benefits from their first time participating in the program as they have a higher chance of getting professional performance opportunities because concert organizers prefer featuring fellows who are seen more often on IndianRaga's social media sites. Higher visibility is the key to building an audience on social media. Returning fellows develop expertise and experience that can lead to further professional opportunities in the organization such as becoming creative directors for the IndianRaga fellowship, Raga lab instructors, or taking on other senior roles (IndianRaga, n.d.). Outlining the benefits of being an IndianRaga fellow underscores the importance US-based Bharata Natyam practitioners see in IndianRaga as a platform for making the form more visible, accessible, and relevant to audiences in the US and globally.

Testimonies from the first dance fellows group in 2016 highlight the importance of participating in IndianRaga as an avenue for developing Bharata Natyam. Through these testimonies, participants reflect on the process of collaborating to produce content for the platform's YouTube page. In three separate videos, 2016 fellows Swathi Jaisankar, Vivek Ramanan, and Aarthy Sundar discuss their experiences and the benefits of participating in the fellowship program (IndianRaga 2016). All three were introduced to IndianRaga via social media. Jaisankar, a Bharata Natyam dancer from New Jersey, heard about IndianRaga through

Facebook and YouTube. Ramanan, a Bharata Natyam dancer from San Jose, California, discovered IndianRaga because he was constantly scouring YouTube for music videos and had friends in the music fellowship program (which began in 2013). Sundar, a Bharata Natyam dancer from Plano, Texas, also first heard about the online platform when she saw one of their videos on Facebook when one of her friends shared a video to her timeline. In stating their introductions to IndianRaga, Jaisankar, Ramanan, and Sundar also mentioned that the high-quality videos also drew them to IndianRaga and inspired them to apply for the fellowship program once a dance specific fellowship emerged. Jaisankar and Ramanan in particular noted how "vivid the productions were," and the "really good, high quality video productions," made them strongly consider applying for the program. The three fellows comments on the ways they were drawn to IndianRaga emphasize the role that social media plays in increasing the visibility of classical Indian arts practices in the diaspora.

Jaisankar, Ramanan, and Sundar's testimonies also elaborate on the collaborative process and the time spent rehearsing, performing, and making videos. This process is explained in the IndianRaga fellowship application. Yearly fellowships happen in the US and India (the expansion to India happened in 2015 as Emani noticed the demand from India-based practitioners). Applicants are evaluated based on three to five-minute clips they send in that showcase both *nritta* and *abhinaya*. Once selected, dance applicants can expect to participate in up to three pieces if they are able to work efficiently to produce those videos. IndianRaga makes it clear on their website that if selected, participants must pay for their travel, accommodations, local transportation, and other costs involved in participating, on top of the application programming fees. In detailing the process and costs involved once selected, IndianRaga also outlines the evaluation criteria in place throughout the duration of the fellowship.

The fellowship begins with a collaboration round, where selected participants come up with pieces that meet the standards of IndianRaga productions. IndianRaga provides a list of themes, but the participants are free to modify or choose their own concept. Once they have decided on their concept, participants submit their concept and its relevance to the IndianRaga panel for review. Once their concept is approved, they begin rehearsing and work towards submitting a draft of their audio/video recording. At each stage, the IndianRaga creative panel is involved in reviewing and approving or rejecting drafts. Once videos are edited, IndianRaga generally approves each video if they meet the standards expected by IndianRaga audiences or if they don't, reserve the right to not release it on their channels (IndianRaga, n.d.). Jaisankar, Ramanan, and Sundar offer more insights into the creative process when participating in the fellowship. Jaisankar notes the long hours spent choreographing, collaborating, and rehearsing pieces, stating that:

> We would come back to the hotel at like 11 at night after eating dinner and then we would go to the cafeteria in the hotel and just dance there until sometimes like 5 in the morning, even though we knew we had to get up at like 8 in the morning… so even with three hours of sleep, that was good enough for us because we were so passionate about dancing and producing music. (Jaisankar 2016)

Ramanan and Sundar also note the late nights and early mornings spent rehearsing over the ten-day fellowship, Sundar further acknowledged that it can be a stressful experience. Ultimately, they all share that these long hours are worth it as the experience brings dancers, musicians, videographers, and other members involved in the process together, to create lifelong memories

and to produce videos that reach audiences in many parts of the world. The fellows' reflections on the long hours spent rehearsing to produce videos demonstrates the importance of belonging to a community of fellow second-generation Indian-Americans in order to collaborate in producing IndianRaga videos.

The emphasis on collaboration in each of the testimonies sheds light on the importance of building a community for reworking Bharata Natyam. The focus on collaboration stems from Emani's observation that the "classical arts can be a lonely journey and producing work can feel isolating" (Emani 2018). The IndianRaga experience in showcasing the best of the Indian classical arts is premised on the importance of collaborating to make that happen. In Jaisankar's video, she comments that the fellowship provided opportunities for her to work with dancers from different styles, which she had never had before. For example, she worked with a Kathak dancer on a piece called "Tum Thana" which allowed the dancers to explore the nuances in each form by highlighting the similarities and differences. In addition to working with dancers from different styles, the IndianRaga fellowship provided access to musicians who were able to help the dancers wherever they needed advice on how to capture the musicality and rhythm of the composition of the movements. This was significant because these dancers may not always have access to a community of musicians when choreographing Bharata Natyam. This is a community of musicians distinct from the community their first-generation teachers established when starting their dance schools. Sundar states that IndianRaga also afforded her the opportunity to work with costume and lighting designers, which enhanced the experience of choreographing and rehearsing pieces. In Ramanan's words, collaborating on different components to making the videos made everything "doable," and not unattainable as that was his initial perception when watching IndianRaga's views on YouTube. Collaborating with many artists of different dance

and other art genres to make IndianRaga content helped all of the fellows develop the necessary skills to be Bharata Natyam artists on many different platforms.

As Emani's earlier comments and Jaisankar, Ramanan, and Sundar's testimonies state, the key to making IndianRaga more accessible is reframing how some classical works have been (and continue to be) presented. In Emani's comments, he notes that classical works aren't accessible because the lyrics are written in languages that aren't spoken anymore and the audio/video quality of existing classical music and dance recordings is dull. The IndianRaga approach to countering the challenge of accessing the Indian classical arts is to produce videos that focus on the parts of Indian classical dance that they deem vibrant and exciting. IndianRaga produces content with the intent of going "viral." Fusion pieces like "Cheap Thrills" and "Shape of You" went viral because they fused Carnatic and American popular songs. In Emani's earlier comments, he asserts that these viral songs bring newer and older audiences together in appreciating classical Indian dance and music. As the views for the videos and other IndianRaga projects started to increase, Emani wondered if "pure classical pieces" would have the same reception and impact as the fusion pieces. To build interest in "pure classical pieces" IndianRaga started to produce videos that focused on the most "impressive" parts of classical pieces (examples of classical pieces are the *alarippu, varnam, thillana*) that are "fast-paced and display more virtuosity." Focusing on the most impressive parts enables audiences to play these pieces on "repeat" mode, which in turn makes them more viral. IndianRaga's emphasis on fast-paced and virtuosic movements reflects the trend toward Bharata Natyam practitioners displaying athleticism that favors *nritta* or abstract movement pieces, especially as more work is shown through online channels and social media platforms. Some practitioners debate and disapprove of this emphasis as it moves practitioners away from *nritya* or narrative movement pieces that

display slower-paced movements. The implications of highlighting fast-paced movements impact *nritya* pieces, in which slower and expressive movements are reworked and sidelined to display contemporary athleticism.

One of the issues IndianRaga practitioners raise is that the themes of classical pieces are set in a context to which practitioners and audiences in the 21st century do not relate to. This is because "most classical pieces tend to revolve around religion and themes of devotion which used to play a much larger role in our lives back then" (Emani 2018). While these themes hold true in the practice of classical arts today, there are other concerns that need to be addressed like the "Me Too movement, discussions on gay rights, war, political discourses, climate change" (Emani 2018). The inability of audiences and practitioners to relate to the themes of classical pieces is also generational, as millennials are central to the endeavor to address the concerns of the 21st century. To spark a conversation across generations that creates more shared experiences this conversation, IndianRaga produces "new age choreographies," that take the building blocks of the classical arts to address new and current issues in society today. An example of IndianRaga's new age choreographies is a Bharata Natyam piece titled *Reflections* that narrates the story and experiences of a transgendered person to highlight LGBTQ+ activism by youth across the world. The United Nation's Free and Equal Movement shared this piece on their Twitter page in honor of International Transgender Day of Visibility on March 31, 2017, further making the piece accessible to audiences across the world in showcasing the relevance of classical Indian dance as a medium for addressing contemporary issues.

In *Reflections*, Sundar executes a series of fast-paced and sharp *jathis* and *theermanams* while wearing a full Bharata Natyam five-piece costume. The choreography is set to a Bharata Natyam repertoire composition called a *jatiswaram*, in which dancers perform *nritta* sequences

set to *swaras* or the musical notes of the *raga* or melody. After Sundar performs the brief *jatiswaram* sequence, the applause in the musical track becomes louder and Sundar pauses and bows her head holding her hands in *anjali* or prayer mudra in a gesture towards acknowledging the audience. As she starts circling in place, still holding the *anjali* mudra, there is a sharp video transition and suddenly Sundar is wearing a white costume with a blue sash around the neck, blue material around the hips. Where her expression was jubilant in the previous section, her expression after the video transition is serious and forlorn. With her focus directed towards the camera she performs a series of gestures that convey the act of shaving the face (using the *kapitha* mudra that involves bending the index finger over the thumb), putting on bangles, and changing outfits. It is unclear if the melody references a specific Carnatic composition, but the tone is somber. At one point there is a knocking sound in the musical track to suggest that the character Sundar is portraying is caught by a family member. Sundar conveys shame at being caught by placing her hands over eyes and ears. As she circles in place with her hands over her ears there is another sharp video transition and Sundar is back wearing the full Bharata Natyam five-piece costume with the applause in the track still going. The piece concludes with Sundar's expression focused on the camera as she portrays the act of removing her earrings and a sheet covering an imaginary mirror. Her expression is peaceful and determined and she stares at her reflection in the mirror (this is further implied through her focus directed to the camera). *Reflections* is a piece about a transgender woman who reflects on her past, remembering a time when she was rejected by society, her own family, and herself, and learning to be content with the reflection she sees in the mirror after transitioning. The musical and video transitions, Sundar's costume choices, and *mudras* highlight some of the ways that second-generation

practitioners rearrange Bharata Natyam staging and compositional elements to convey contemporary themes and issues when presenting work on social media platforms.

The YouTube comments under IndianRaga's *Reflections* indicate a generally supportive response. People commented that Sundar's performance was a "good take on a sensitive subject," and it was "nice to see young dancers using the medium to express stories that are important to them" (IndianRaga 2017). Other comments praised her for "beautifully emoted performance" (IndianRaga 2017). These comments indicate an appreciation for IndianRaga's approach to producing "new age choreographies."

Using the building blocks of Bharata Natyam to address current issues in society today is important for second-generation practitioners to reflect the contexts they live in. Ketu Katrak's article "'Cultural Translation of Bharata Natyam into Contemporary Indian Dance': Second-generation South Asian Americans and Cultural Politics in Diasporic Locations" focuses on how second-generation practitioners create new choreography using contemporary themes. These practitioners do this by basing their work on their training in Bharata Natyam, what Katrak identifies as the most popularly studied traditional classical dance style from India, Bharata Natyam, along with other movement vocabularies such as modern dance, jazz, and yoga (Katrak 1998, 77). Katrak's article provides an important lens for analyzing IndianRaga's "new age choreographies" like *Reflections* as second-generation practitioners in this context rework Bharata Natyam techniques and themes to demonstrate the paradox that there is much in the tradition to value and celebrate and much that needs to be challenged. The push and pull between what should be valued and what needs to be challenged is reflected in new works that use Bharata Natyam and other styles for "autobiographical pieces, exploring personal identity, family and gender dynamics, and moving outward into social issues connected to contemporary

life in the US" (Katrak 1998, 88). As an example, Katrak analyzes a piece that uses the gestural vocabulary of traditional *padams* or lyrical poems to evoke a feminist and progressive interpretation of the popular song, "Killing me Softly With His Song" by the Fugees. One of the practitioners Katrak interviews states that in her work, she tries to show that "tradition does not die because we try to express something contemporary or relevant to a new generation. Ultimately the drive to innovate helps the tradition to live" (Katrak 1998, 78). The drive for second-generation practitioners to innovate to help the tradition live on is reflected in Emani's earlier comments that emphasize IndianRaga's role in innovating classical art works to make them more relevant to today's context. The push and pull between what should be valued and what should be challenged in Bharata Natyam characterizes the ways second-generation practitioners negotiate Bharata Natyam as they rework techniques to make classical dance more "viral."

Other examples from the 2016 dance fellows' choreographies demonstrate IndianRaga's approach to cultivating "new age choreographies" that speak to the concerns of the 21st century. Sundar and Jaisankar collaborated on another piece celebrating LGBTQ+ stories through Bharata Natyam. Titled *Revelations*, the piece depicts the story of a daughter coming out to her mother. Through fast-paced, sharp *adavus*, with circling arms rotating outward, the dancers begin in unison to convey the close bond between the mother and daughter. When the mother tells her daughter she wants her to get married soon, the dancers utilize only conventional Bharata Natyam *abhinaya* and *mudras* to depict a conversation. There are no lyrics in the composition, so the viewers follow the story through the *mudra* sequence. For example, when the dancer playing the mother conveys her wishes for her daughter's marriage, she holds her left hand in *shikhara* (literal translation: peak), with all the fingers bent and pressed against the palm

except the thumb, which is raised and held erect, and right hand in *mrigasirisha* (literal translation: deer), where the fingers are bent knuckles except for the pinky finger and thumb which are held straight up. The dancer extends the right hand towards the left hand to convey marriage. When the daughter comes out to her mother, they resume performing *advaus*, still in unison but facing different directions to convey conflict. The dancers emphasize this opposition in the ways they keep their face turned in one direction but do not follow their hands with their eyes (this is in direct contrast to the way Bharata Natyam *adavus* are performed with the eyes following the arms and hands). The piece concludes at the moment the dancers turn to face one another, stopping in *samapadam*, their *abhinaya* softening their facial expressions to convey the moment where the mother accepts her daughter. Jaisankar and Sundar both highlighted these two pieces as memorable for the opportunity to express important issues through Bharata Natyam, underscoring how second-generation practitioners use Bharata Natyam as a tool for activism to spark a dialogue on LGBTQ+ rights in the South Asian diaspora.

IndianRaga's platform features pieces that showcase how second-generation practitioners transform perceptions of classical dance through practices manifesting cultural hybridity. In *This is How We Dance Now! Performance in the Age of Bollywood and Reality Shows*, Pallabi Chakravorty examines the phenomena of digital spaces to showcase innovation and improvisation through mixed dance movements. Her text provides a framework for analyzing IndianRaga's popularity as a platform for presenting hybrid classical works. Looking at the impact of digital media on the Bollywood film and dance industry, Chakravorty proposes the term "remix," to capture the new practices and aesthetics of Bollywood dance. She argues that this new practice of mixing forms—high and low, classical and folk, Indian and international—forms produce endless hybridity. The term "remix," implies a "…a fluid, porous, and ephemeral

understanding [that] replaces the notion of an authentic, stable, and durable practice" (Chakravorty 2018, 103).

Looking closely at the impact that online spaces have had on classical Indian dance forms, Chakravorty argues that "the codified bodily techniques of classical Indian dance or *bhava-rasa* has no relevance for this generation of dancers as their identities perpetually negotiate the "remixed" images they encounter in their classes and media. Ultimately their dance practice of "remix" means porosity, flexibility, hybridity, and fluidity and cannot be attached to any iconography dance" (2017, 138). Though IndianRaga is a platform that showcases Bharata Natyam as porous and flexible in the ways second-generation collaborate, perform, and film pieces set to Carnatic stylized versions of Jason DeRulo's *Swalla* and EDM versions of *Alarippu, Varnam,* and *Thillana*, the platform also complicates Chakravorty's analysis and arguments. Though derived from Bharata Natyam vocabularies, the dancers rework these techniques to highlight the stylistic variations of the compositions (sharper, fast-paced *adavus*). However the "remixed" pieces on IndianRaga are meant to highlight the relevance of Indian classical dance and their demonstrated porosity, flexibility, and fluidity are meant emphasize the importance that classical Indian dance systems can still have even when they shift to the online platform. Through the development of the labs, jams, fellowship, and certificate programs, IndianRaga aims to foster an appreciation for systems like the *gurushishya parampara*[20] (teacher-student), while also adapting its effectiveness to the online platform.

IndianRaga is a popular platform for second-generation practitioners to rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues and media.

[20] As Chakravorty notes in her text, the *gurushishya parampara* was adopted and adapted by the modern institutions of dance training in India (and this transformation happened in the reinvention of classical dance forms at the beginning of the 20th century).

However, as they develop Bharata Natyam to make it more legible to audiences across generations within and outside the South Asian diaspora, the high costs of participating in the different programs makes the ability to rework Bharata Natyam techniques accessible only to participants of a similarly high class status. For example, a Bharata Natyam practitioner who participated in IndianRaga's fellowship program told me that on top of paying the application fee, she had to pay for her travel, hotel, and food for a week. She also stated that IndianRaga retains whatever funds are made from the video. While viewers can watch the videos for free on YouTube, the application fees and traveling costs involved to join one of the programs call into question the ways IndianRaga claims to make Bharata Natyam an accessible practice.

The channel's development of "new age choreographies" provide second-generation practitioners the opportunities to develop pieces that address current issues like LGBTQIA+ rights and climate change (to name a couple). Second-generation practitioners who participate in the fellowship perform these choreographies at different venues across the US. Second-generation practitioners who participate in the fellowship perform these choreographies at different venues across the US. One of these venues was the "Howdy Modi" event in Houston, Texas in 2019. The event featured Prime Minister Narendra Modi with former President Donald Trump. According to the New York Times, it was the largest-ever gathering with a foreign political leader in the US with 50,000 people from the Indian diaspora in attendance (Shear 2019). It is notable that IndianRaga performed at this event as their participation demonstrates an alignment with the radical Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) of Modi's policies. Second-generation practitioners are interested in IndianRaga's platform because they can choreograph, produce, and circulate work that highlights the relevance of classical arts in today's context. However, by accepting performance opportunities in the diaspora that reinforce Hindutva nationalist politics,

they reinforce politics and policies that run counter to their desire to transform and challenge Indian and Hindu nationalism embedded in classical Indian dance practices. In the next section, I will further examine the tension between challenging traditional Indian cultural values through online platforms, yet reinforcing these viewpoints in the spaces where they perform, and how they label their videos, in the context of online competitions.

Navigating Second-Generation Identity in Festival Competitions

Dance theorist Sherril Dodds writes that formalized dance competitions are a global phenomenon across a multitude of styles and genres, which are staged as regional, national, and international events" (2019, 6). Dodds questions what competition does to dance and dancers, and how dance practitioners respond to and negotiate the nuanced relationship between performance and competition. I pursue Dodd's question in this section by analyzing what competition does to Indian dance practices in the diaspora and how second-generation practitioners negotiate ideas of competition in developing Bharata Natyam in the US. In closely examining the structure and benefits of participating in online competitions, I argue that second-generation practitioners are expected to demonstrate the tradition of Bharata Natyam yet they negotiate their first-generation parents' nostalgia for India through the different ways they respond to judges' questions, remix musical and dance styles, and rework Bharata Natyam aesthetics to perform in a particular space.

To examine the emergence and popularity of online festivals, I first look at some examples of Indian dance competitions in the US diaspora. In Chapter 2, I introduced the importance of classical Indian dance competitions for second-generation Indian American practitioners in my analysis of the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival's dance competition. This

competition is an important platform for second-generation practitioners to demonstrate their competence as Bharata Natyam practitioners by performing five-minute pieces, followed by questions from the judges. I examined to the participants' responses to the judges questions and argued that their responses are spaces where they challenge the judges' claims of what is important to understand as a Bharata Natyam dancer in the US. I analyzed their responses through Maira's study on how second-generation youth negotiate the collective nostalgia for India (re)created by their parents and their peers through re-mixed practices.[21] The moments where participants challenge the judges' claims of what is important to know as Bharata Natyam dancers allows them to negotiate this nostalgia that they have picked up on from their parents but don't entirely understand on their own terms. The Cleveland Thyagaraja is a popular competition in the US diaspora for second-generation practitioners to highlight the values integral to Bharata Natyam repertoire pieces. However, the competition also provides second-generation practitioners a venue to negotiate their parents' nostalgia to make traditional Bharata Natyam repertoires relevant to their generational and cultural contexts.

To examine the emergence of online competitions, it is important to understand the impact of other classical dance competitions in the diaspora. There is the Natya Idol Competition in St. Louis, Missouri, the Natya Sangamam Competition in Skillman, New Jersey, and the Shivam Bharata Natyam Competition in Bellflower, California. Participating in these competitions and placing at the top is important for second-generation practitioners in receiving financial support to perform in India and the US. These performance opportunities establish a performer's credibility in building their artistic profile. Also on the Bharata Natyam competition

[21] In her book. Maira uses the term "remix" to highlight the music itself, as It involves mixing samples of dance music, techno, jungle, and reggae, with samples of *bhangra* music. Maira also uses the term "remix" as a metaphor for the cultural identifications that are mixed in the space (2002, 10).

circuit is the Young Arts National Competition in Miami, Florida. The Young Arts National Arts Competition accepts auditions in ballet, choreography, modern-contemporary, tap, and world dance forms. Participants in the world dance category perform Bharata Natyam regularly. Through their national competition, Young Arts identifies the most accomplished young artists in the visual, literary and performing arts, and provides them with creative and professional development opportunities throughout their careers. Since 2002, classical dance has been featured prominently as many of the winners are classical Indian dance practitioners. The recognition of classical Indian dance on the national level furthers the drive for second-generation practitioners to compete in classical dance competitions to develop their profiles as aspiring artists.

As an example of the importance classical dance competitions in the diaspora for second-generation practitioner, Jaisankar, a 2016 IndianRaga fellow and current IndianRaga creative director, competed in the 2015 YoungArts competition and was one of eight Young Arts winners in the Classical Indian dance category among 12,000 applicants. Prior to competing in the YoungArts competition, she was awarded first place for Classical Indian Dance at the Baltimore Competition, received the title of "New Jersey Naatya Shiromani" after placing first in the Krishna Vrundavana Temple Competition, and was one of the top five finalists in the international Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival (Decker 2015). Being a Young Arts finalist gave her the opportunity to apply to participate in Young Arts' regional programs which allowed her to further tune her skills and network with other dancers and professionals. The classical Indian dance competition circuit in the US provides second-generation practitioners with the platform to hone their skills and develop their profiles as professional artists in the US. Developing their professional profiles as Bharata Natyam practitioners is important to making Bharata Natyam

more visible and accessible to audiences familiar and unfamiliar with Bharata Natyam practice. Another important reason for participating in competitions is to make pursuing Bharata Natyam professionally a viable career path. The stakes for second-generation practitioners to pursue Bharata Natyam professionally is important for first-generation parents to see because the expectation is that their children will pursue careers solely in medicine, law, and engineering.

The ways second-generation practitioners negotiate their parents' nostalgia for India can be further analyzed in the context of intercollegiate dance competitions. In intercollegiate competitions, second-generation youth "remix" music and dance practices to negotiate and manage their South Asian American identities within US universities. An example of an intercollegiate competition is the Buckeye Mela at The Ohio State University (OSU). Marketed as the "biggest, largest, and greatest dance competition in the Midwest," Buckeye Mela is an annual, national intercollegiate competition at OSU's Mershon Auditorium in Columbus, Ohio that showcases Bhangra and Bollywood fusion styles of dance. It features teams from up to fifteen colleges including Ohio State, University of Michigan, University of Georgia, and Case Western University. Half of the participating teams compete for first place in the Bhangra category, a folk form from Punjab, India, and the other half competes for first place in Bollywood fusion, which entails a combination of dance styles from Bollywood films including Bhangra, classical Indian dance styles, hip hop, contemporary, and Latinx forms. I focus on the staged choreographies of what are termed "fusion" and Bhangra dance forms. Important to the choreography of a fusion and Bhangra piece is a theme or narrative conveyed through movement, music, set design, and lighting design. Second-generation practitioners negotiate cultural difference spatially and physically through these elements in performing their intercultural South Asian American identities. These choreographies offer a nuanced

understanding around issues of identity and representation within the US South Asian diaspora through the operations of the movement mixtures in the dance forms.

To examine fusion choreographies at Buckeye Mela, it is important to understand what draws students to student clubs and what their motivations are to participate in and develop these competitions. Priya Srinivasan examines the importance of joining cultural groups for second-generation South Asian dancers, which she states provides an avenue for expressing themselves creatively even while pursuing their professional career goals (Srinivasan 2004, 255). Srinivasan also states that second-generation South Asian dancers are drawn to culture shows to "rediscover their ethnic roots," through forming ethnic enclaves such as South Asian student associations at universities as they begin to realize that they have not been assimilated in the American project (Srinivasan 2004, 255). The turn to "rediscovering ethnic roots," and "finding an avenue for creative expression while still maintaining professional goals" is also addressed by authors Meena Khandelwal and Chitra Akkoor in their article, "Dance on! Inter- Collegiate Indian Dance Competitions as a New Cultural Form." Analyzing a South Asian intercollegiate competition at Iowa State University, they note that through organizing and participating in the competition while still pursuing degrees in medicine, engineering, and law, "[second-generation] college students are able to showcase themselves as good children fulfilling familial aspirations of higher education and upward mobility while also demonstrating their familiarity with, and enjoyment of, Indian culture." In demonstrating their familiarity and enjoyment of Indian culture while also showcasing their upward mobility, Khandelwal and Akkoor note that as they are performing their "Indianness" they are also showcasing their identities as American college students performing "cool" so as to win the admiration of their non-Indian peers" (2014, 280). Khandelwal and Akkoor use the term "cool" to assert that second-generation practitioners

perform multiple cultural affiliations to make public claims of belonging in the wider campus domain (2014, 286). At Buckeye Mela, second-generation practitioners perform their Indianness and coolness in multiple ways. For example, the Buckeye Mela opens with the singing of the Indian and American national anthems. The tactic of singing both national anthems sung sets the stage for the pieces in the competition that address the multiple cultural affiliations of those who will "get" and "won't get" the references in the display of Indian culture and arts practices alongside aspects of American culture arts and practices. This further provides a space for South Asians to assert their hybrid identities as connected to both India and to the United States.

To further understand ethnic belonging and the performances of "cool" that shape the competition choreographies to create spaces of belonging within the wider campus domain, I focus on one specific piece from the 2019 competition (which I attended in person) by fusion team Case Kismat from Case Western Reserve University. The piece opened with a video introduction that explained the narrative written by the Case Kismat team: when an Indian child lost her parents, her next door neighbors, a white couple, became her legal guardians. Once the video introduction was over, the cast joined the featured leads cast and went through a progression of dance styles like contemporary dance, hip-hop, and bhangra, to narrate the adjustments the young Indian woman and the white couple were making to become a family. As they move between dance styles, there were breaks of recorded dialogue in between each scene that was interpreted literally by the featured leads in the video introduction. For example, as the Indian girl becomes frustrated and fearful of losing the Indian side of her "identity" she enacts this frustration and fear in dialogue with the white couple, by bringing her hands to her forehead and stomping off the stage all while lip-synching the recorded dialogue. This movement reflects an anxiety among second-generation practitioners that they are assimilating too rapidly and will

lose their connection to their Indian identity. Following this exchange, the dancers start performing classical Indian dance, most closely resembling Bharata Natyam that is evident in the way they jump into *aramandi* and *muramandi*. Once deeply in *aramandi*, they strike the feet in place, extending their hands from the center of their chest outwards. The performance of classical Indian dance in this piece was indicative of a sense of returning "home," of retaining Indian traditions. This sense was aided by the use of illuminated *diyas* or lamps dotting the stage. Case Kismat's choreography essentializes Indian identity with the dichotomy between the Indian values they learned in their households and mainstream American influences in the classical Indian dance choreography section.

At the same time, the piece expands notions of identity within themes of belonging, assimilation, and multiculturalism especially in the section towards the end of the piece that utilizes hip-hop choreography to display how the Indian woman and the white couple are united as a family. In her article "Swaying to an Indian Beat…*Dola* Goes My Diasporic Heart: Exploring Hindi Film Dance," Sangeetha Shresthova examines the use of hip-hop to assert a sense of belonging and unity as she analyzes the importance of culture shows for second-generation Indian Americans. She states that through "American hip-hop, second-generation college students establish a temporary space that stresses an idealized heritage affirmed through assertive movements specific to the performers location in the US" (Shresthova 2004, 95). In her text Maira elaborates that "the consumption of hip hop by desi youth reveals an ambiguous race politics in the second-generation that highlights anxieties about class mobility, generational alienation, and a desire to possess 'subcultural capital'" (2002, 27). The use of hip-hop specifically to emphasize an "idealized heritage" is consistent throughout the remainder of the fusion pieces at Buckeye Mela in addressing a variety of themes from friendship, loss, to

interpreting stories like *The Jungle Book*. However, South Asian American's appropriations of Blackness to affirm their belonging in the US reinforces the "model minority" myth of upward mobility at the was used in direct opposition to Black Americans (as discussed in Chapter Two). South Asian American's appropriation of hip-hop in collegiate fusion pieces complicates and contradicts the second-generation practitioners' work I discussed in Chapter Two, who are committed to dismantling of anti-Black racism in the South Asian community.

While performing their positionalities as second-generation South Asians, the students also perform their positionalities as college students from their specific campuses and include references that members in the audience from their schools "get." Integral to the choreography of the fusion pieces are the elaborate costumes, lighting and set designs. For example, one team's narrative was based on three friends ending up in a haunted house (the broader narrative was the anxiety of three friends growing apart as they got older) and the pulsating lights, intricate props that included cardboard tombstones and a cutout of the entrance to the haunted house, helped convey this narrative. The costumes were also indicative of the style they were to perform. If they were performing classical Indian dance, the pants were similar in design to *shalwars* or loose, pleated trousers. Within music ranging from a mix of popular songs like Sia's "Chandelier" to popular songs from Bollywood films like "Dhoom Again" and depending on the audience members familiarity with the range of songs, those who "got" the references within American pop and Bollywood songs, screamed and cheered loudly.

Multiple cultural affiliations that second-generation Indian Americans display at intercollegiate competitions were also evident in the Bhangra pieces. Rather than introduce a story, the video at the beginning of the piece introduced members of the team set against popular hip hop, pop, or bhangra music with EDM. As they navigated complex formations executing

high-energy leg lifts, jumps, grounded positions with the feet wide apart, sharply placed arms, and a softness in the head and neck tilts, they also utilized a variety of instrumentation that seemed integral to the practice of Bhangra. The dancers set Bhangra pieces to popular songs like Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina," a song which combines the genres of Latin Urbano, Reggaeton, and Pop. At the end of their performance, the team exited the stage amidst cheers from enthusiastic members from their college's community members in the audience. For second-generation practitioners, intercollegiate competitions are spaces where they negotiate their parents' nostalgia for the "homeland" and certain ideologies of Indianness within the context of American college life.

Global Recognition: The Popularity of Online Competitions

The impact of Indian dance competitions in the diaspora on the production of "remixed" practices provides context for analyzing the significance of online Indian dance competitions that have become increasingly popular, especially as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic generates a demand for more online platforms. To situate the IndianRaga and Navatman online competitions within the broader matrix of American dance competitions, dance scholar Karen Schupp provides a brief history and overview of dance competitions in the genres of contemporary, jazz, tap, hip-hop, and ballet. Schupp asserts that dance competitions offer adolescents a meaningful venue through which to perform, build community, and nurture transferable proficiencies. Transferable proficiencies are skills such as resiliency, perseverance, time management, self-efficacy, and interpersonal awareness, that are not necessarily artistic or technical, but are needed to successfully perform (Schupp 2019, 46). In not implicitly or explicitly selling these skills, dance competitions are framed as "experiences," that make adolescents invest in performing at

dance competitions. Schupp highlights a few key points that can be applied to framing second-generation practitioners' competition experience in classical Indian dance online competitions. One of the ways dancers actively contribute to performance standards in dance competitions as they prepare for and perform at competitive events is by watching their peers. Schupp also states dance competitions aim to offer an enjoyable experience that makes participants feel part of a dance community by fostering positive feelings and memories. This is done "…through the practice of granting each entry an award based on a predetermined score rubric instead of solely ranking first, second, and third place in each category, as this practice increases the likelihood that all competitors will leave feeling good about their place in the dance competition community" (Schupp 2019, 56). The IndianRaga and Navatman online competitions reflect the American dance competition experience Schupp describes.

Before the pandemic, IndianRaga started an online competition for Indian musicians and dancers in beginner, intermediate, and advanced categories across different age groups. IndianRaga decided to add competitions to their platform because they provide opportunities for performance. Performance is a critical part of arts training and for talent to be recognized by audiences across the world. The way the competition works is that each month, participants submit 3-5 minute pieces based on a different theme to any of the following categories (beginner - less than 3 years of training; intermediate - 3 to 6 years of training ; advanced - more than 6 years of training) in any one of the following genres: Carnatic Music, Hindustani Music, Semi classical/folk/devotional/regional music, Movie Songs, Classical Dance, Semi classical/Folk/Fusion/Bollywood Dance, Digital/Electronic Music (although the prevalent style featured on the competition YouTube page is Bharata Natyam). Examples of monthly themes are: [pick] your favorite piece (January), Ganesha (August), Diwali/Rama/Light (October), and

[pick] any philosophical theme and present it (November). Organizers evaluate entries on the basis of technique, creativity and other aspects. Participants can submit monthly entries because the goal is to accumulate points to become an overall winner of the competition. Competition participants can earn 3 points for participation, 6 points for being a runner-up, and 8 points for being declared a winner. The benefits of participating in the IndianRaga competition are that it promotes regular practice, so that participants can achieve a meaningful goal and motivation to practice per month. Another benefit is getting the opportunity to see fellow participants perform, which allows them to know where they stand in their genre as they learn from their peers.

The other main benefit is that the winner of each category is featured on IndianRaga's popular Facebook page. As I emphasized earlier in my analysis of IndianRaga's fellowship and lab programs, participating in the online competition allows a global platform to be recognized by audiences across the world. In some cases, contest winners became popular in continuing to showcase their work to a global audience. Participating also leads to feedback opportunities as winners get discounts on the IndianRaga certification and jam programs. They note on their website that "[their] unique, timestamp-based, detailed feedback is actionable and meaningful, and will help you know exactly what your strengths and weaknesses are and how to work on them" (IndianRaga, n.d.). The IndianRaga competition is one of many programs that provides second-generation practitioners opportunities to perform and gain global recognition.

The current winners (advanced classical Indian dance category) in the 2021 IndianRaga performed excerpts from Bharata Natyam repertoire pieces. The five winners (in 2021, four were from the US and one from India) each performed devotional pieces in praise of Rama for the October 2021 monthly theme of Diwali/Rama/Light. Through deep *aramandi* poses, sharp, tight footwork, and pronounced *abhinaya*, the performers demonstrated different stories from the

Ramayana.[22] The classical dance pieces exemplify what Dodds notes, that competitions homogenize movements according to adjudication standards. She asserts that competition "…potentially fixes dance as judges maintain agreed-upon competencies that construct a version of the dance considered to be correct or true to its purported origin" (Dodds 2019, 6). The winning pieces that are uploaded to the IndianRaga page on first glance display a competition framework of preservation and reproduction as students upload Bharata Natyam repertoire pieces that were passed on to them by their *gurus*. Yet participants perform these pieces from different spaces in their homes (or theater venues or studios if they have access to them). In one of the winning submissions, one dancer performed on her doorstep. The space was large enough for her to perform, yet she had to rework some of the arm and leg extensions to stay within the camera's frame. Further, the monthly themes of Diwali, spring harvest, etc., provide some agency for second-generation practitioners to select the pieces that best represent that theme. Their selection and performance provide a space for second-generation practitioners to negotiate their parents' and teachers' nostalgia for India.

While the IndianRaga competition aims to provide second-generation practitioners with opportunities to perform and gain global recognition, not all second-generation practitioners feel there are benefits to participating in the competition. Srinija Adibhatla, a second-generation classical Indian dance practitioner from Cleveland, OH, participated in the IndianRaga Competition in 2018. She accumulated a high number of monthly points to place first in the overall competition. In going through the intended benefits of the competition, she noted that she "didn't receive any feedback, they would just give her the points." Further, she couldn't

[22] The *Ramayana* is a Sanskrit text which follows Rama's quest to rescue his wife Sita from Ravana. There are key moments from the *Ramayana* that Bharata Natyam practitioners perform like Rama's marriage to Sita, Rama's fourteen-year exile, and Rama and Ravana's battle.

understand why she was placing first in the competition as she felt that there were dancers who were "performing at a higher level, yet were placing as runner-ups each month" (2022). Adibhatla noted that while it was cool to be featured on IndianRaga's Facebook page because in this space, she received comments from viewers, it didn't lead to more opportunities for her in the classical Indian dance community. In fact, her video ultimately got lost in IndianRaga's Facebook feed as they posted many videos daily (2022). She also questions the popularity of IndianRaga's Facebook page as "these days mostly older people post there." In her opinion, being featured on Indian Raga's Instagram or TikTok accounts would lead to more global recognition than dated social media platforms like Facebook. Adibhatla's comments highlight the contradictions in IndianRaga's practices for providing feedback aim and the social media platforms they use to promote second-generation practitioners.

The Navatman Monthly Online Competition also provides a platform for emerging second-generation practitioners to develop as artists. Launched in November 2020, Navatman offers a series of monthly challenges for young Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Carnatic and Hindustani music students. On their website, they state that the "…Navatman Competition was not created just to be another dance or music competition" (Navatman, n.d.). With similar language to IndianRaga, the organizers of the Navatman Dance Competition state that they developed the competition because they saw a need for aspiring classical students to have a platform for growth and a stage to share their form of expression. They also state the competition gives rising artists an opportunity to watch and learn from their peers around the world, while individually working towards something exciting in this isolating time. This last part indicates the need to develop this competition amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be discussed further in examining the significance of developing more online competitions and its impact on

in person competitions. The Navatman Competition centers just classical Indian dance which is different from IndianRaga which allows participants from more genres to compete. They emphasize this point in stating that the best part of the competition is that each participant gets actual feedback from real artists in the classical Indian arts field.

The competition is for classical Indian arts students between the ages of ten and eighteen and the overall benefits of participating in the monthly competitions is to receive individualized feedback from world-class judges, watch and learn from students at their age and level, and with the chance to win a free class. The challenges are based on genre (so November 2020 was Bharata Natyam, January 2021 was Kathak, etc.). Students have a little over three weeks to submit an individual one-to-two-minute video (recorded from their laptop or phone) of a dance or song piece. Two or three judges review roughly fifteen submissions, compile their feedback which participants receive as a graded rubric, and select one winner in each age group. By the end of the month, Navatman broadcasts all submissions and announces the champions of the month. Navatman's competition is meant for "…students of Indian classical arts around the world who are passionate about growing through the arts, excited to learn from and share their art with a community of like-minded peers, looking for personalized feedback in their genre of arts, and an opportunity to perform and use their arts for expression" (Navatman, n.d.). The judging criteria is based on execution and stage presence. Ultimately, the benefits for competing can be summarized in three categories. The first is "show," meaning that in showcasing their talent, participants take a step forward in their classical journey. The second is "know," meaning participants receive constructive feedback from professional artists in the field. And the third is "grow," meaning that participants' deepen their experience by participating and seeing what their peers are doing.

The genre for the November competition was Bharata Natyam. Participants were required to submit a one-to-two-minute video dancing their favorite *jathi* or *korvai*[23] in *adi tala* meaning an eight-beat rhythmic pattern. Navatman presented the recorded submissions and results over Zoom on December 6, 2020. Aparna Shankar, a second-generation Bharata Natyam dancer in the Navatman Dance Company, hosted the online competition and opened it with the same points that the Navatman website emphasizes. In the video, Shankar states that the Navatman Dance Company is unlike any other classical dance competition, created because they saw a need for aspiring classical students to have a platform for growth and a stage to share their form of artistic expression, and that the most critical part is receiving feedback from judges who are artists with extensive experience in the Indian classical arts world. In the middle of the competition, Shankar explained the judging criteria, stating that participants are evaluated in two categories. The first is presentation. Under presentation, the judges look for stage presence, energy, and vibrancy that they bring to the performance, how well they execute the complexity of the choreography, the costuming, and how organized and neat the backdrop is. The other category is technique. They are specifically evaluating footwork (clarity, ease, speed), *aramandi* (maintaining a low *aramandi* that challenges what is physically possible while it remains aesthetically pleasing) control of the limbs and core, and use of the eyes (tracking whether the eyes follow the hands), accuracy, and clarity of mudras. The judging criteria is similar to the Cleveland Thyagaraja in-person competition, though with the Thyagaraja dance competition, participants are expected to verbally demonstrate their understanding of the pieces they perform.

[23] *Jathis* or *korvais* are adavus set to a particular *talam* (rhythm) and *kalam* (speed) and usually concludes with a *teermanam*

The performances at the November competition demonstrated the importance of online competitions as platforms for fostering artistic growth. There were a total of 13 dancers featured and the order of their videos was based on who sent their videos in first and not on category. Some dancers wore full five-piece Bharata Natyam costumes and other dancers wore half-saris or *salwar kameez.* Each dancer performed *jathis* or *korvais* from the repertoire pieces *jathiswaram, varnam, thillana.* For example, one dancer performed a *korvai* from the *Gokuballa Varnam,* a piece on Krishna. Most demonstrated or attempted to demonstrate the presentation and technique elements the judges were evaluating their work on (like clarity of footwork, accuracy of mudras, and a deep *aramandi*). All of the dancers' videos showed them performing in varying spaces within their homes, with some performing in front of an accent wall or a wall draped with s*aris*. Shankar noted it was exciting because the audience got a glimpse into the participants' homes that added more individuality to the videos. Throughout the competition stream and in between videos, Shankar shared insights into her own development as an aspiring artist, noting that she herself is growing so she always asks other artists (especially the artists who she has a chance to meet at the Drive East Festival) their advice for young artists. Almost all of them tell her to keep watching dance. Shankar also advised participants to watch performances in other genres of dance to get a sense of qualities like stage presence, how to reach audiences through expression and movement, etc. Shankar then posed a question to the audience, wanting to hear from the participants about their growth process during the competition and what they learned about themselves. Because I watched the video on YouTube instead of on Zoom, there were no comments posted to the chat in response to her questions. It is possible that participants were responding in the Zoom chat when Navatman broadcast the competition that day.

The judge's comments also emphasize the importance of the Navatman competition as a platform for aspiring artists to grow. Sridhar Shanmugam, the lead judge for the November Bharata Natyam competition, emphasized the importance of dance competitions, stating:

> Dance competitions pave a great path for dancers. [The competition] pushes the dancers to work harder in preparation. It puts more effort in making the performance a grand success. It gives scope to research further, to understand the current world standards, a standard of excellence for the performing arts. Dance competition creates exposure, new prospects for dancers of the dance world. It helps the dancer to gain visibility and create avenues to choose a career in pursuing the journey in dance. Competition can also expose the expression of the dancer to viewers who have never appreciated the art form before. Another feather to Navatman's cap in creating the path in the journey of a dancer. (Shanmugam 2020)

Apoorva Jayaraman, the supporting judge for the Navatman, also highlighted the importance of dance competitions to develop aspiring artists in her comments following the participants' videos. Through her own experience, she emphasized the importance of competitions stating that these are great opportunities for students who aren't yet ready to perform full length pieces and to learn so many varied things that cannot otherwise be learned in the classroom itself like learning to manage nerves, negotiating space, and developing stage presence. Excited by all of the wonderful dancing she got to evaluate, Jayaraman also stressed the importance of the competition for dancers to develop as artists in the feedback they receive and the opportunity to watch and learn from their peers. In learning from their peers, it is possible that aspiring artists

may feel inspired to improve their technique and presentation, which will be an important step forward in their dance journey. Jayaraman also remarked that there is no substitute for hard work and rigorous formal training, and training does not end with an *arangetram*[24] or with an award or with any other milestone. These milestones should serve as inspiration but should not signal the end of the journey. Shanmugam and Jayaraman's thoughts on the importance of dance competitions serve to emphasize the journey of training and pursuing a career in the classical arts. Dance competitions are another platform for second-generation practitioners to develop as practitioners through regular practice (and the competition provides more motivation), judges' feedback, and opportunities to watch their peers. Yet, as Adibhatla's earlier comments highlight, competitions are not always beneficial for developing a regular practice or improving through judges' feedback, especially if that feedback is not clear.

The substantial financial costs involved for second-generation practitioners to participate in these competitions calls into question the rhetoric of Bharata Natyam developing as a more accessible practice in the US. Schupp's chapter highlights the importance of learning that occurs at dance competitions that happens through preparing to compete, performing, watching other performances, and the judges' critiques. She also discusses the financial investment, stating that "…dance competition culture is relatively expensive, conspicuous consumption and ideas about class mobility and status in relation to the purpose of dance and dancing may indirectly influence parents' and guardians' decision to enroll in competitive dance lessons" (Schupp 2019, 52). There are fees to compete in the IndianRaga and Navatman online competitions. For example, participants can purchase a competition package (for the whole year it costs $240.00). Learning classical Indian dance is expensive including costs for classes, costumes, and other items,

[24] *Arangetram* is a solo dance debut a Bharata Natyam dancer performs at the end of their training.

especially when a student reaches the *arangetram* which might also require paying teacher's fees and auditorium costs. Indian classical dance competitions are less accessible to participants who are unable to pay the fees to perform in these competitions. Second-generation practitioners who negotiate Bharata Natyam in the spaces of these competitions do not acknowledge their class and caste privilege, which ultimately reinforces Indian attitudes around class upward mobility and Hindutva in the diaspora.

In 2022, as I am writing this chapter, there is increasing demand for holding classical Indian dance competitions online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This demand is underscored by the cancellation of in-person competitions like the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival and Shivam, thus making way for online platforms to become prevalent spaces for holding competitions. Yet channels like IndianRaga and online competitions are not the only spaces where second-generation practitioners are pursuing opportunities to develop their profiles as aspiring artists and producing work that reworks Bharata Natyam techniques to reflect their diasporic identities. In the next section, I examine social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram as emerging spaces where second-generation practitioners utilize the algorithms of those platforms to assert the relevance of Bharata Natyam in the US.

#bharatanatyam: Social Media and Bharata Natyam Performance

Under the hashtag #bharatanatyam on TikTok, a multitude of Bharata Natyam versions of popular dance challenges appear. The first is Bharata Natyam choreography to Doja Cat's song "Woman," a song that combines Afrobeats, pop, and R&B musical styles. This song has already generated thousands of dance challenge videos on TikTok. In this 15-second video, TikTok user @aishuadd interprets the song starting at the lyrics, "just protect her and keep her safe…baby,

worship my hips and waist," using Bharata Natyam vocabulary. For example, @aishuadd makes a fist with both hands and crosses her arms at the wrist to show "safe," then bringing the palms together she slowly extends the arms above the head to show "worship," while simultaneously swinging the left leg, toes carefully pointed, in front of the right. When the refrain starts "Let me be your woman, woman, woman, woman," she shifts into *aramandi*, continuously and quickly jumping on to the balls of her feet and placing her heels down, while she swings both hands in *dola hasta* back and forth in opposite directions. Throughout the 15-second video, @aishaudd's fluid poses and footwork punctuate the Afrobeat influence in the song. @Aishaudd's "Woman" performance is reminiscent of the interculturalism in Shankar's and Gopal's work that represents multiple identity positions working and performing in the US.

The segment @aishuadd performs in the video was originally choreographed by TikTok user, @__hxrini, another Bharata Natyam dancer who sets choreography to Carnatic remixes of popular songs like "Blinding Lights" by The Weeknd and "Levitating" by Dua Lipa. @Aishudd's video became even more popular when it was displayed alongside Doja Cat's "Planet Her" album on Spotify. This brought more views to her TikTok video as the pinned comment on her video indicates. She writes, "This form of Indian classical dancing is called Bharata Natyam. I've been practicing it for 17 yrs now. It's sacred and at least 2000 y/o!" It is significant that @aishuadd's video was on Doja Cat's Spotify playlist because Doja Cat herself studied Bharata Natyam. In a Billboard interview with Gil Kaufman, Doja mentioned Bharata Natyam was the first dance style "she learned at the age of five… and that Bharata Natyam taught her to be emotive and control her body in a special way" (2021). Doja Cat's connection to Bharata Natyam is also discussed in TikTok videos under the "Bharatanatyam" hashtag. In a video posted by @realmaharani, she records the Billboard interview with the caption over the

video “WHO WAS GNNA TELL ME THAT DOJA CAT LEARNT BHARATA NATYAM?” This connection underscores the role that social media plays for second-generation practitioners to make Bharata Natyam more visible as they rework and adapt Bharata Natyam’s techniques, compositions, and themes for social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Through combining music, dance, and dialogue to create viral videos, second-generation practitioners remix Bharata Natyam techniques with popular social media challenges to highlight their cultural hybridity, and celebrate cultural representative kindred spirits in celebrities.

To examine the role that social media plays for second-generation practitioners to rework Bharata Natyam, it is important to look at the function of social media apps for negotiating identities and building online communities. Trevor Boffone’s *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* analyzes how members of Generation Z, the “Zoomer” generation, use social media dance apps to connect and build relationships, while also working out identity and status. Focusing specifically on Black female creators on Dubsmash, Boffone argues that digital spaces add “equity to dated socialization practices, allowing previously marginalized individuals the opportunity to recognize the import and value of their identities” (2021, 9). Black female content creators create work on platforms like Dubsmash that “push dance and music in new directions and shape the way that US teens of many races and ethnicities experience social media and its reverberating effects” (Boffone 2021, 5). Boffone’s analysis on social media apps as a key site of identity performances for Black female content creators provides a framework for examining ways second-generation Indian American practitioners use “profile pics, likes, favorites, story posts, feed posts, and the like to present or conceal different parts of their identities” (2021, 9). As this section examines, second-generation practitioners work out their identities while negotiating the significance of Bharata Natyam practice to their

lives through social media apps. The content second-generation practitioners post on social media platforms enables personal growth and community building that is important to developing Bharata Natyam as a diasporic practice in the US.

The emergence of social media apps gives insight into how they have become a key site of identity performances. As Boffone writes, TikTok has emerged as one of the world's most essential platforms for youth expression, identity formation, and shaping a collective generational culture among Zoomers (2021, 26). The app was created in 2016 by Chinese conglomerate ByteDance and became available in the United States in summer 2018. In a roundtable on "TikTok and Short-Form Screendance Before and After Covid" the panelists explained that TikTok videos are limited to 15 seconds (although recently videos can be uploaded up to 60 seconds). Users can only film videos using the vertical or portrait orientation of the app. These constraints play the biggest role in shaping dance styles and choreography on the platform. Choreographers construct simple sequences of movement in order to stay under that 15-second marker and in the limited space of a portrait-oriented phone screen, so that amateur dancers can learn and replicate those simple sequences (Krayenbuhl 2021,199). The simplicity of these dances on TikTok are meant to prioritize socializing and popularity instead of doing the dance right (Oh 2021, 197). The Bharata Natyam dance challenges I came across on TikTok did not consist of simple movements. The choreography in these videos is meant to be learned by other trained Bharata Natyam dancers. While second-generation Bharata Natyam dancers on TikTok get attention from artists like Doja Cat and Lizzo and audiences in and beyond the US, they are not "viral" in the way other dance challenges like "Say So," and "Blinding Lights," are in terms of attracting different levels of dance experience. Thus, TikTok is

creating a platform that is open to all, but Bharata Natyam performers are finding their own, more exclusive streams because of the aesthetic literacy one needs to participate.

TikTok quickly became a cultural force once it entered the market in 2018, defining Gen Z as exemplified through 2 billion downloads in its first four years. The majority of TikTok users are young women; women ages eighteen to twenty-four comprise 22.6 percent of the app's users (Boffone 2021, 26). Second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners participate in this digital space by producing content that allows them to shape their cultural identities. The videos under #bharatanatyam also focus on aspects of Bharata Natyam training and performance. One video uploaded by @riyakishen, titled "Thoughts During my Arangetram," shows a 1-minute video from her *arangetram* with an automated voice stating thoughts and observations going through her head as she was performing like, "Don't you dare fall," "omg my legs are burning," and "bro is that guy asleep."

Another video uploaded by @shangaviabby shows her detailing the process of doing Bharata Natyam hair and makeup. The text bubble in the video displays her responses to the questions viewers ask. These responses allow @shangaviabby to share further insights into her Bharata Natyam training like the first time she wore the costume and how long it takes to put it on. Second-generation practitioners demonstrate the ways social media is a key site for identity performance. Through combining music, dance, and dialogue to create viral videos, second-generation practitioners make their labor as Bharata Natyam dancers visible (Srinivasan 2011, 8). Making these aspects visible allows them to connect to users familiar with Bharata Natyam that builds community as dancers with similar experiences commiserate over the many hours it takes to put on the costumes and the exhaustion one experiences during the *arangetram*. These experiences highlight what Boffone notes as TikTok being a space for empowerment and

agency, as the platform allows marginalized communities to no longer automatically be excluded for not being the mainstream (2021, 28). TikTok is a space for second-generation practitioners to highlight their experiences as Bharata Natyam dancers in the US, while also being a platform for establishing their agency in building a community with other users on the platform.

TikTok continues to grow as an important platform for users to work out their identities within the cultural contexts in which they live. Boffone notes that TikTok is a space for empowerment and agency, but it is also an app that is plagued with many of the material issues of racialized identity that are hallmarks of social life in the United States. In the roundtable "TikTok and Short-Form Screendance Before and After Covid," panelists also discussed how users on TikTok and Short Form apps like Dubsmash create, curate, and circulate content, highlighting issues of appropriation and visibility. Panelists discussed the issue of TikTok as a platform where many see TikTok as the space where white youth steal dances that Black youth create and develop within their own community, and profit from them (2021,199). Second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners challenge TikTok's pervasive whiteness (as articulated by the roundtable panelists) in producing content that highlights second-generation Indian American experiences. In the videos I have come across, second-generation practitioners highlight issues of appropriation not in the ways they are evident in Bharata Natyam, but in the ways South Asian culture is appropriated at large in the US. For example second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioner @dancesahi's TikTok video on YouTube uses text to react to a white male's discussion of the ways the wellness industry appropriates the spiritual practices of non-white cultures. Her text highlights examples of this appropriation like meditation practices, turmeric lattes, and Hindu idols in yoga studios. Her video is captioned with the following: "the worst is I do not have easy access to my own space so I get stuck having to use the space of those

who took it." This caption and @dancesahi's video highlight how TikTok is a space for challenging the ways different industries appropriate South Asian culture. Further, @Dancesahi's calls attention to the prejudices second-generation practitioners face in the US in terms of how white wellness, arts, and other industries appropriate South Asian culture yet continue to marginalize South Asian Americans in these spaces. TikTok provides a platform for second-generation Bharata Natyam practitioners to make visible the racism they experience as they create Bharata Natyam videos to highlight the complexities of being American.

However, most of the videos under #bharatanatyam do not further address Bharata Natyam's role in appropriating the dance from hereditary practitioners. There are a number of videos posted about what Bharata Natyam is. In a video posted by @aishudd, she explains through captions that Bharata Natyam is a classical Indian dance form, that it is rooted in Hinduism, the makeup is bold, and that it is a very sacred dance form. Other videos explain the different elements (*nritta, nritya, and natyam*). As discussed in Chapter 2, practitioners are grappling with ways to perform Bharata Natyam as a tool for social justice as they critique the form's own history of appropriation. TikTok is an emerging a space for second-generation practitioners to present and make visible aspects of their practice to highlight the generational, cultural, and social identities in the US. Yet as their work receives more likes and comments on social media, they introduce Bharata Natyam as an ancient, sacred practice. This reinforces the same issues that second-generation practitioners are challenging as they make Bharata Natyam relevant to their experiences of growing up in the South Asian diaspora. Second-generation practitioners see social media platforms as opportunities to rework Bharata Natyam in ways that highlight their cultural identities. This changes the practice yet also runs the risk of reifying the

narratives that second-generation practitioners want to confront which ultimately signals that social media is not immediately a space that will transform Bharata Natyam.

While social media has emerged as a prevalent platform for Bharata Natyam performance, the Gen Z practitioners I interviewed both had differing views on making Bharata Natyam visible through TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. In an interview with dancer Jothika Gorur, she mentioned that while she uses social media to find out about performance opportunities, she very rarely posts her work on these platforms. When she does, she shares her work with her Close Friends list on Instagram. In an interview with Bharata Natyam practitioner Nithya Kasibhatla, she is hesitant to post Bharata Natyam choreographies on social media because she is protective of her work. Further, Nithya does not agree with the choreographic approaches on these platforms because there is "a shift towards more acrobatic, over-exaggerated dancing than traditional dancing" (Kasibhatla 2022). Kasibhatla notes that this shift indicates that practitioners want "to garner the attention of non-Indian audiences and to appeal to fusion dancers" (Kasibhatla 2022). Kasibhatla's comments highlight debates between practitioners mentioned earlier in the chapter around the shift towards *nritta* to appeal to a broader audience online. Second-generation practitioners' critique of this shift is also indicative of the tensions between reworking Bharata Natyam practice and tradition. The disapproval of online work that highlights *nritta* also indicates the desire to maintain the slower, expression-based components that becomes conflated with tradition. These viewpoints indicate that not all second-generation practitioners see social media as a platform for making Bharata Natyam more visible in highlighting their experiences in the US.

Conclusion

At a time in the mid-to-late 2010s when second-generation practitioners were creating work on IndianRaga's YouTube channel, and social media apps, the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 forced practitioners to shift more of their lives and practice online. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media apps became critical sites for entertainment and socialization when people could no longer safely gather in public places in person. In this chapter, I examined how IndianRaga festival and online competitions, and social media apps are popular spaces for second-generation practitioners to produce Bharata Natyam pieces that reflect their cultural hybridity. Second-generation practitioners produce work on these platforms with the hope of increasing Bharata Natyam's visibility as a popular practice. Doing so, they hope, will lead to more professional performance opportunities. However, second-generation practitioners also reinforce issues they want to challenge in their reworking of Bharata Natyam like presenting the form as an ancient, spiritual practice or performing at events that support right-wing Hindutva politics. Further, the financial costs of participating on platforms like IndianRaga and online competitions are high. The high costs in terms of travel, admission, and application fees, challenge the holistic accessibility of Bharata Natyam as these costs demonstrate that only second-generation practitioners with the socioeconomic means can rework Bharata Natyam. Online spaces enable second-generation practitioners to transform Bharata Natyam by addressing contemporary themes and issues relevant to their experiences as Indian-Americans.

Conclusion

I spent the start of 2022 watching the Madras Music Academy festival—that takes place at the tail end of the Chennai Music and Dance Season—from my hotel room located a mere 0.2 miles (350 meters) from the Music Academy venue in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. From my understanding, some *sabhas* hosted in-person festivals. Others, like the Federation of City Sabhas and Kalakendra hosted another season of "Yours Truly, Margazhi," which, similar to the previous year, featured videos of over 100 performances with 250 artists in Carnatic concerts, dance performances, workshops, lecture demonstrations, and dramas. By the time I arrived in Chennai, at the height of the Omicron COVID variant spreading through India, most of the festivals had ended and the last remaining ones, like the Music Academy festival, were virtual. As I sat in my hotel room struggling to watch the festival through my room's slow wi-fi connection in my room, I was bummed out, once again, to experience the Chennai Music and Dance Season online, especially since this time I was in such close proximity to the festival venues. However, experiencing the festival online allowed me to further reflect on one main question that came up when I started this research at the beginning of 2020: How much longer will online festivals exist as platforms for practitioners and audiences to access classical Indian dance in different parts of the world without traveling? Because the Omicron variant was spreading quickly globally at the start of 2022, I thought online Indian classical festivals would have a continued presence as we navigated the unknowns of two years into the pandemic. Yet, as the year progressed, my question expanded to how much longer in-person festivals will exist as

platforms in the US because the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana and Drive East Festivals did not return in 2022.

In reflecting on the precarity of classical Indian dance festivals in the US and India, I started to hear about different classical Indian festivals in the US like the Geeva Arts Festival, in Louisville, Kentucky, the Rocky Mountain Thyagaraja Utsavam in Northglenn, CO, and the Margazhi Festival in San Francisco, CA. Though I recently heard about these festivals, the Geeva Arts Festival and Rocky Mountain Thyagaraja Utsavam have been around for the last ten plus years. The Margazhi Festival started as on online festival in 2020, and will be holding their first in-person festival in 2022. In the past two years since I started this research, some online festivals emerged because of the pandemic like the "Quarandhimi" Darbar Virtual Utsav, hosted by the youth-led Facebook group "Subtle Thakadhimi Traits" (it is unclear where, geographically, the Facebook group is based out of), Thandavam Festival based out of Virginia, and Ragatala Summer, based in the South (Gorur 2022). Some of these festivals that have emerged during the pandemic are moving to in-person formats, thus expanding the US-based classical Indian dance festival scene. Therefore, the feeling of dread at the thought of Indian classical dance festivals disappearing was replaced by the realization at how rapidly classical Indian dance festivals have emerged in online spaces the time since I started this research.

Throughout out this dissertation, I have sought to examine the emergence and growth of festivals, competitions, and online platforms in the US and how these platforms provide opportunities for second-generation Indian Americans to develop, advance and make Bharata Natyam relevant, visible, legible, and accessible in the US. I argued that second-generation Indian American practitioners make Bharata Natyam a relevant practice in the US for audiences in the South Asian diaspora to reflect their generational, political, social, cultural context in the

US. In analyzing second-generation practitioners' choreographies at the festivals, competitions, and online platforms, I argued that second-generation practitioners transform Indian cultural attitudes by reworking Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes to reflect contemporary issues like LGTBQIA+ rights, anti-Black racism in the South Asian community, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing contemporary issues transforms gender, religion, tradition, and nationalism in Bharata Natyam practice. Further, I examined the conversations second-generation practitioners have for addressing casteism in Bharata Natyam as they develop the form as a tool for social justice.

In Chapter One, I situated this study historically by tracing the emergence of South Asian dance forms on American concert stages and the changing attitudes towards Indian dance both in India and the US through the US tours of Roshanara, Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar, Bissano Ram Gopal, Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Indrani Rahman, and Shanta Rao beginning in the early 20th century. I argued that discourses of Orientalism and exoticism accompanied the circulation of South Asian dance practices in the US through the ways Indian dance practitioners and American dance critics familiarized audiences with classical Indian dance aesthetics between 1920 and 1965. I connected the reviews written about 20th century artists to the 21st century reviews on classical Indian dance festivals as a way to highlight how present-day Bharata Natyam practitioners still negotiate US orientalism as they develop and rework Bharata Natyam for American concert stages.

Examining American dance critics' reviews on Indian dance in the 20th century into the 21st century yielded key insights around what is considered classical Indian dance in the US. Analyzing the ways American dance critics write about tradition and innovation in classical Indian dance forms provides a foundation to explore the tensions between tradition and

innovation that second-generation practitioners experience in the aesthetic and thematic changes that second-generation practitioners make in Bharata Natyam through the work they present at Indian classical dance festivals in the US and India. In Chapter Two, I argued that second-generation Indian American practitioners' desire to transform Indian cultural attitudes further stems from a desire to make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice in the US. This means making work that is accessible to audiences outside the South Asian diaspora in the US and increasing performance opportunities, platforms, and resources for Bharata Natyam practitioners to showcase their work. The work that I highlighted from these festivals directly addressed the Black Lives Matter Movement in the summer of 2020 in their work, as they confronted anti-Black racism in the South Asian community. Prompted by anti-racist work that emerged in 2020, practitioners also addressed casteism in the Bharata Natyam community by critiquing the exclusion of hereditary practitioners in the practice and ways to decenter their own privilege in amplifying hereditary dancers' voices.

In Chapter Two, I argued that stakes for making Bharata Natyam visible is about making the form more "mainstream," so that it is seen as equivalent in status to ballet, contemporary, and modern dance in the US. In my conversations with Bharata Natyam practitioners in the US, the tensions between Indian American practitioners and artists from India also heightens the stakes for second-generation to make Bharata Natyam relevant so they have more opportunities to perform. This is because they feel that festival presenters are more likely to feature established artists from India with a large following on social media, than upcoming artists or even established Indian American practitioners in the US. In addition to losing out on performance opportunities in the US, Indian American practitioners are also viewed by practitioners from India as not being serious in their Bharata Natyam pursuits (Gorur 2022, Iyer 2022, Skandan

2022, and Kasibhatla 2022). The tensions between Indian and Indian-American artists in the US heighten the stakes for second-generation practitioners to address issues relevant to their experiences in the US. However, these stakes have consequences when second-generation practitioners do not consider issues from India relevant to their American lives. For example, second-generation practitioners may not feel compelled to address caste in their work because they see it as a problem in India and not applicable to their day to day lives in the US. As I discussed throughout this dissertation, the issue of caste is integral to Bharata Natyam practice in the US because the presence of dominant-caste elites in the US after 1965 have shaped the ways Bharata Natyam is represented by first-generation teachers and second-generation students. Therefore, second-generation practitioners separating relevant issues between American and Indian contexts in reworking Bharata Natyam in the US run the risk of perpetuating the same discourses they hope to transform in their work.

In Chapter Three, I examined the desire for second-generation practitioners who seek to make Bharata Natyam more visible and legible to audiences in different parts of the world through online organizations and social media platforms. While I argued that second-generation practitioners use online platforms and competitions to make Bharata Natyam more visible, accessible, legible and relevant as a continuously developing practice in the US, I also examined the implications of doing so. For example, IndianRaga's model of producing viral videos through their fellowship program is inaccessible to practitioners who do not have the resources to submit an application fee or pay for a flight and accommodations to travel to where the fellowship takes place. As second-generation practitioners rework Bharata Natyam on these social media platforms, I also argued that they reinforce issues of Indian nationalism in the diaspora in their promotional material, the events they perform at, and the ways they label their work once they

receive a lot of views and "likes" on videos they upload to Instagram or TikTok. I also analyzed the popularity of in-person and online competitions to further highlight how second-generation Indian American practitioners manifest cultural hybridity through choreography, music, costumes, and set designs. Bharata Natyam competition platforms also provide spaces for second-generation practitioners to make Bharata Natyam visible, since the goal for competition organizers is to develop Bharata Natyam dancers into professional artists.

While second-generation practitioners acknowledge the prevalence of online organizations and social media platforms for making Bharata Natyam visible, practitioners are also critical of the work being showcased on these platforms. Some practitioners feel that Bharata Natyam performers' movements are sharper and faster when they perform online because the emphasis on *nritta* will make their video "viral." Reworking Bharata Natyam techniques to appear more athletic for online performances is an issue for the practitioners I talked to because favoring sharper movements detracts from the slower and softer movements that are also integral to Bharata Natyam performance.

Second-generation practitioners' critiques of online performances are especially fraught during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as practitioners debated the merits of performing on social media versus online festivals. On one hand, Bharata Natyam on social media means more people will be able to access this work at no cost. On the other hand, Bharata Natyam performances on social media may decrease the likelihood of audiences paying to see performances at classical Indian dance festivals. At the Town Hall discussion at the Drive East Festival in 2020, participants noted that more performers are less likely to be paid for their work if they perform more regularly on social media, an issue that already persists at large in the classical Indian dance community. The debates between practitioners around how different

platforms impact Bharata Natyam performance are central to highlighting the stakes and consequences of making Bharata Natyam visible online.

To expand my research on Bharata Natyam performance on social media and competition platforms, it is important to look more closely at the generational differences between second-generation practitioners. The Gen Z practitioners I talked to for this study were aware of the opportunities that exist for them if they are serious about pursing Bharata Natyam, therefore making it easier to chart a path for how to gain those opportunities. The Gen X and Millennial practitioners I interviewed talked about the lack of opportunities for them growing up because there were very few South Asian communities in the US. These differences need to be explored further to highlight the stakes for second-generation Indian American practitioners to pursue Bharata Natyam professionally.

Throughout this dissertation, I also examined the importance of online organization, competitions, and social media platforms within the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some practitioners I talked noted their appreciation of online festivals in providing more opportunities to watch Bharata Natyam in different parts of the world without having to travel to see them. They appreciated being able to present work at online festivals based in India without having to travel to them. However, in my follow-up conversations with these practitioners in 2022, while some of these practitioners were hopeful that festival presenters will continue to offer hybrid options for presenting and attending, all were grateful to be giving in-person performances again, because they were burnt out from being online. The rapidly shifting festival scene in the US and India will be important to my future research in assessing the impact the pandemic has had on classical Indian dance in the US.

My analysis of caste in the conversations and throughout this dissertation needs to be further researched. In the next phase of this research, I plan to further examine the construction of "Indian-American," "Indian," "American" identities in the American context, to provide a more intersectional analysis on caste, race, and gender. This analysis will allow me to expand my arguments on the importance that second-generation practitioners see in reworking Bharata Natyam techniques to reflect their political, social, and cultural contexts. I also plan to further explore the stakes for second-generation practitioners to make Bharata Natyam visible and accessible in the US.

There are more areas to research when examining the cultural attitudes towards Bharata Natyam that are being transformed by second-generation Indian American dancers navigating constantly between cultural attitudes in the US and India. This dissertation is just the beginning in a lifelong pursuit of analyzing the circulation, transmission and transformation of Bharata Natyam practices in the US. To conclude, the work I discussed in this project demonstrates the importance second-generation Bharata Natyam dancers see in transforming and increasing the visibility of classical Indian dance to reflect their hybrid and complex positionalities in the US. Further, this dissertation highlights the growing importance of festivals, competitions, and online platforms for providing second-generation practitioners opportunities to make Bharata Natyam relevant to their lived experiences in the US.

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