

PREFACE

Why I wrote this book on Bharatanatyam

The genesis of my decision to author a book on Bharatanatyam, a dance form that epitomizes the rich and diverse cultural fabric of India, was a journey that threaded through personal exploration, historical reverence, and a deep-seated passion for storytelling through the art of dance.

In the complex, rich narrative of Indian art and culture, there resides a special space where sculpture and dance intersect, narrating tales of heritage, spirituality, and aesthetic profundity. It was within this space that my inspiration to delve deeper into the world of Bharatanatyam was kindled, fueled by the ancient temple sculptures that stood as silent, yet eloquent, witnesses to the rich tapestry of Indian tradition. This essay recounts my journey of being inspired by these magnificent sculptures to learn and embrace Bharatanatyam dance.

My initial rendezvous with temple sculptures happened during my visits to the historic temples that adorn the Indian landscape. The intricately carved figures, frozen in various dance postures, seemed to reverberate with a silent rhythm, beckoning viewers to explore the world they encapsulated. The grace and poise of these sculpted figures gradually began to foster in me a profound fascination and a yearning to unravel the narratives etched in stone.

As I looked closer, I started seeing dance in stone and narrative in gestures, a rich tapestry of mythology, spirituality, and ancient tradition coming to life through the sculpted forms. Each sculpture told a story through meticulously carved expressions and postures, emanating a grace that was both ethereal and grounded in the tangible world. The temples transformed into galleries of living art, where sculptures whispered tales and invited me on a journey through the rhythmic world of Bharatanatyam.

What started as a fascination soon emerged into an engagement, a desire to not just be a spectator but to immerse myself in the world depicted by the temple sculptures. I began to visualize myself echoing the grace and poise of the sculpted dancers, a vision that nurtured the seeds of inspiration to learn and research about Bharatanatyam.

Learning about Bharatanatyam opened a doorway to a deeper connection with my heritage. Each dance lesson felt like a dialogue with the ancient sculptors and dancers, a rhythmic conversation



My Daughters

transcending time. The dance floor mirrored the temple grounds, and my understanding of this dance form echoed the stoned sculpted dancers, reviving the narratives carved in stone through pulsating, living motions.

With time and perseverance, the temple sculptures which were once frozen in stone began to find fluid expression through my dance. The once silent figures found a voice in the rhythmic beats of Bharatanatyam music, and the narratives etched in ancient stones unfolded gracefully in the dance studio, recounted through my evolving dance vocabulary. I felt like an artist bringing sculptures to life, giving motion to the motionless, and voice to the silent narratives portrayed in the ancient stones.

My journey from being inspired by temple sculptures to learning Bharatanatyam has been a poetic cycle of art coming to life from stone and returning to its dynamic form through dance. The temple sculptures, with their silent yet profound narratives, beckoned me to a world of rhythmic expressions, sculpted tales, and fluid histories, fostering a space where heritage pulsates with contemporary relevance.

Every step I take is an homage to the silent sculptors who captured the essence of this ancient art form in stone, guiding cultural enthusiasts like me to find inspiration and to mirror the rich tapestry of Bharatanatyam in the dynamic canvas of life. It is a journey of tracing narratives from stone to flesh, a passage where history, art, and personal aspiration dance in unison, echoing the rich, pulsating rhythms of Indian heritage through the art of Bharatanatyam.

As I ventured into my academic pursuits, I discovered a rich trove of literature and scholarly works that elucidated the theoretical underpinnings of Bharatanatyam. The seminal texts such as *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* opened avenues of exploration into the philosophical and spiritual dimensions that underlie this dance form. My intellectual curiosity burgeoned, instigating a deep-seated desire to contribute to the existing body of knowledge with a narrative that would weave the ancient with the modern, highlighting the evolving tapestry of Bharatanatyam.

Despite the voluminous works available on Bharatanatyam, I perceived a gap that awaited bridging — a contemporary text that would harmonize the rich traditions with modern sensibilities, offering a platform for emerging voices and innovative approaches to the art. The envisioning of a book that would be a melting pot of tradition and innovation, theory and practice, legends and living narratives became an irrefutable call, urging to be brought to fruition through diligent research and passionate storytelling.

Living in a globalized world where boundaries were constantly being redrawn, I envisioned the book as a beacon that could carry the essence of Bharatanatyam to every nook and corner of the world. The urge to highlight this mesmerizing Indian classical dance form to a global audience, fostering a universal appreciation for its aesthetics, techniques, and narratives, was a potent catalyst in solidifying my decision to pen this book.

As I stand on the threshold of bringing this vision to life, it is with a heart brimming with respect for the maestros and pioneers of this art form, a mind eager to learn and absorb, and a spirit hopeful to contribute to the ongoing legacy of Bharatanatyam. It is a journey embarked with a sense of humility, a spirit of inquiry, and a fervent desire to weave a narrative that pays homage to Bharatanatyam, celebrating it not just as a dance form but as a vibrant, living testament to India's rich cultural heritage.

In the vibrant tapestry of Indian cultural heritage, the dance form of Bharatanatyam holds a place of reverence and distinction. A dance of celestial legends, rooted deeply in spirituality and the rich soils of the Indian subcontinent, Bharatanatyam, with its intricate footwork, expressive abhinaya, and profound narratives, paints poetic imagery in motion. As we stand at a juncture where tradition meets modernity, where the ancient intertwines with the contemporary, it becomes pertinent to explore, revisit, and document this phenomenal dance form in all its glory, with a lens polished by the sands of time.



Chidambaram Temple



This book, therefore, is both an homage and an exploration — a journey through the harmonious blend of rhythm, space, and emotion that is Bharatanatyam. While it takes its roots from the historical, spiritual, and ritualistic foundations laid down in texts like Natya Shastra and Abhinaya Darpana, it also ventures into the realms where tradition adapts, innovates, and resonates with the changing paradigms of the contemporary world.

Through the chapters that unfold, we will waltz through the historical corridors where Bharatanatyam was nurtured in the sacred precincts of temples, sustained, and enriched by the devoted artistry of the Devadasis. We pay homage to the pioneers who reinvigorated this art form in the early 20th century, bringing it to the proscenium stage, thus opening a world of opportunities and transformations. The essence of this book lies in its endeavor to be a bridge between the spiritual and the artistic, the learner and the maestro, the past and the present.

In the crafting of this book, I have sought to take a multidimensional approach, encompassing the technical nuances, the rhythmic brilliance, and the emotional depth that Bharatanatyam embodies. It is an endeavor to create a repository that is rich with insights for students, teachers, and enthusiasts alike, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of this dance form. From delineating the intricate mudras to elucidating the rich narratives portrayed through dance, this volume aspires to be a companion to both the seasoned artist and the curious onlooker.

As you delve into this narrative, expect to immerse yourself in a world that moves gracefully between the rhythm of the mridangam and the storytelling of the dancer. Expect to meet artists who embody devotion, discipline, and a deep love for the art, who become one with the stories they narrate, transcending the physical to reach the sublime.

As you turn the pages, I invite you to step into a world of rhythmic grace, of storytelling through movement, and of a dance form that embodies the rich tapestry of human emotions, spirituality, and the vibrant hues of Indian culture. I hope this book becomes a small window through which you can appreciate the cosmic dance of Bharatanatyam, a dance that harmonizes body, mind, and soul in a symphony of grace, rhythm, and beauty.

Let us embark on this journey together, with hearts open to the eloquence of silence, the language of the body, and the poetry in motion that is Bharatanatyam.

I have to thank my wife Latha for her patience in this journey where i have not spent as much time i should have while i was immersed in completing this book.

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