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Bharatanatyam in Malaysia

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Introduction

Bharatanatyam, an Indian classical dance form that originated in south India, has circulated internationally since the early 19th century. Being a global dance form, its circulation intensified with the movement of Indian bodies from its home in India to various parts of the world, in search of a better standard of living. The Indians who migrated to various parts of the world brought with them their rich cultural practices and founded dance schools drawing from their artistic background. According to Janet O'Shea, the amateur practice of the dance form is seen as a means for immigrants to maintain their social identity as diaspora.

While Malaysia is popular for various forms of Indian dancing, which comprises of classical forms (namely Bharatanatyam and Odissi), folk dances, and filmi dances (Bollywood dancing), this article will specifically focus on Bharatanatyam dance practices. Bharatanatyam, being the oldest form of Indian classical dance form practised in the country, encapsulates, in its own right, various interesting issues that require attention.

This article explores the development of the dance form in Malaysia, particularly the narrative about how Bharatanatyam has evolved from the dance of the Indian diaspora community to a dance form that is being practised by multi-ethnic practitioners in the country. Thus, by transgressing the boundaries of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, Bharatanatyam in Malaysia presents an interesting phenomenon for study.

Development of Bharatanatyam in Malaysia

Though the period from the 1920s to the immediate post-war years seem to provide a strong foundation for the development and spread of various Indian cultural forms, details about Bharatanatyam became visible in Malaya only in the 1950s. Dance masters V. K. Sivadas2 and Gopal Shetty3 began their classes in the 1950s, followed by the other institutions such as Usha-Prema Dance School, Padmini Dance Group and Tanjai Kamalaa Indira Dance School in the 1960s.

Many Indian classical dance teachers in Malaysia were taught by V. K. Sivadas and Gopal Shetty. Krishen Jit describes the development in the following words: ‘Post-Independent Malaya witnessed the earliest large scale dissemination of Indian classical dance to non-Indian audiences. Sivadas and Gopal Shetty were in the forefront of this historic movement.’ Sivadas and Gopal Shetty played significant roles in introducing

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2 Sivadas studied dance under the famous nattuvanar, Palanisamy Pillai, of Rabindranath Tagore Academy in India, followed by three years of training under the famous Guru Gopinath of Natamakal of Madras and in 1962, he took advanced Bharatanatyam training from Kuchipudi Ganasia Pillai in Madras. Sivadas came to Malaya in 1953. Besides securing a job as a clerk in a government office, he received enormous opportunities to perform. In 1957, joining forces with his wife, the Sivadas-Vatsala troupe was formed. This was considered as one of the oldest dance schools in Malaysia which provided training in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and folk dances. The couple's performances created cultural history in Malaysia with a rich variety of items, costumes and props, supported by musicians of high calibre.
3 With extensive training in classical forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, and Manipuri as well as folk dancing, Gopal Shetty came to Malaya with experiences of choreographing dance sequences in Bombay films. His compositions, which blended dances of Indian origin to the local scene, captivated the audience in Malaya.