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# My Experience in Bharata Natyam (Indian Dance)

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### **My Experience in Bharata Natyam (Indian Dance)**

Have you ever thought of learning a new style of dance? Or exploring a new way to consider a particular dance or music? Well! Let me suggest that you try an Indian dance class, particularly "Bharata Natyam," and push yourself out of your common dance style. In addition, you will rediscover some hidden talents and expand your circle of friends. Those aspects are what I found during my journey in Bharata Natyam, Indian dance.

Bharata Natyam is one of the very famous traditional Indian dances in South India. It is usually performed in the temple of Tamil Nadu, one of the 29 states on India, by professional dancers. Bharata Natyam is defined by the two words which compose its name: "Bharata" and "Natyam," according to "A Dictionary of Bharata Natya," the first word "Bharata" is comprised of three syllables: the first syllable is "Bha" which stands for *Bhava* and means "Emotion or State of mind"; the second one is "Ra" which stands for *Raga* and means "Musical mode", and the last one is "Ta" which stands for *Tala* and means "Cyclic Rhythm". The second word "Natyam" or "Natya" is defined as a representation of *rasa* (reaction or creation of moods) through *abhinaya* (communication). Therefore, the words "Bharata Natyam" mean a *Natya* (representation of communicative reaction) which has *bhava* (emotion), in *raga* (music) and *tala* (rhythm) (Rao, 12, 40, 49 & 59).

My journey in Indian dance started on February 17, 2016, at 6 pm at Phillips Center, Urbana, Illinois. The classroom was quiet; from the corridor, I was only able to hear the rhythm of a woman's voice saying: "Tai-ya, tai-yum, Tai-ya and tai-yum." I entered the room and sat down on the floor to watch the other students performing the Bharata Natyam. I was also counting the meter (duple) while my teacher or guru, Ms. Anine Singh-de Grood,

was giving the rhythm to the students. During the break, I got a chance to introduce myself to my teacher and the students. The classroom was mostly composed of women, a man, and children who were watching their parents performing the dance. I was also invited to join the other students and perform with them on my first day. However, I declined this offer in order to understand the dance by watching the students, and to learn some hand and foot movements. I finally joined the students on the second day. I was so worried because I had never danced an Indian dance. Because I frequently saw Indian dance in Bollywood films and watched the students performing the dance, I thought that the dance would be easy to perform. The truth is that it wasn't easy like in the movies. I had to push myself to work hard in order to follow the rhythm imposed by the other students and the teacher. However, I rediscovered my hidden talents of theater and African traditional dance, which were the keys of my success in my journey in the Indian dance.

For example, during the beginning of the song, the students and I had to walk as if flowers were in our open hands. We were obliged to represent flowers in our hands with a specific hand gesture (see picture I on page 5). As it is mentioned at the beginning, Bharata Natyam is a representation of communicative reaction of an emotion via music and rhythm. Our faces were expressing divine serenity like we're in front of God. Our walking went with the rhythm of the song which was expressing a slow rhythm of divine presence. I was able to express those face, hand, and foot gestures thanks to my theater talents, which was realized during my primary school years. In addition, knowledge of African traditional dance helped me to hold physical and rhythmic energy imposed by some hand and foot gestures combined together. For example, to the book "Bharata Natyam Indian Classical Dance Art," one of the combinations of hands and feet require the use of the *Katakamukha*\* position, from which the hand then stretches diagonally from the chest to the *Alapadma*\* position. At the same time, the

feet are in *Parshva*\* position while the body has to be in *Mandala* or *Aramandi* \*posture ("Bharata Natyam Indian Classical Dance Art", 36, 37 & 47) (see picture 2 on page 5). Hence, I find myself playing with my face, my hands and feet like I was on a theatre stage with an audience.

In addition, I have expanded my circle of friends during my journey. Most of them are Indian; some are born in the United States and others are immigrants like me. For example, Anjali Balan is a woman of 35 years and the mother of one girl, Vina. She was born in India and came to the U.S. for family reasons. She was learning the Bharata Natyam in order to be a distinguished woman and enhance her marriage as is customary in Indian tradition. She was doing very well during the lessons, and she helped me with some hand movements during the lessons. My other friends were Cheema, a 56-year-old woman and Dora, a 19-year-old woman. Both were always willing to work with me on some of my movements during the break time or before the lesson. Besides, we are now good friends and text each other almost every day on the phone to know how things are going in everyday life. Although most of the students were Indian, there was also an American woman, Helen. She was the one who really encouraged me to keep up with my Indian dance on my second day.

For instance, Helen told me, "Do not be afraid! The more you dance, the more you become better in Indian dance. You have to keep up on that." This advice was so motivating for me that I decided to give my best during the lesson by enhancing my hand and foot movements. I really pushed myself during the first performance on my second day, and continued doing this during the following classes. Actually, Helen and I plan to participate in an upcoming African dance program of Beninese traditional dance on campus. Hence, I have found new friends in my journey in Bharata Natyam, Indian dance.

Learning a new dance style, such as Bharata Natyam, is one way to open yourself to a

different world by discovering some unexpected talents and going outside of your personal circle of friends. I was willing to learn an Indian dance in order to discover more about my talents; I also wanted to see if I can dance like those in Bollywood films, and I did. As a reward I have new friends, and after a few months' effort, I now know how to dance an Indian dance. At the end, I had a great experience on my journey in Bharata Natyam, Indian dance. Therefore, why don't you try and see how exploring a different dance style can enhance your life?

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\* *Katakumukha*: the thumb is stretched to be in contact with the first and the middle finger while the other two fingers are stretched and separated.

\* *Alapadma*: the fingers are all relaxed and separated.

\* *Parshva*: feet are turned on the side forming a horizontal line.

\* *Mandala or Aramandi*: the feet are on *Parshva* with maximum space of one span between them. The weight of the body is symmetrically balanced on both the feet. The knees are bent with the thighs at a distance of about three spans from the ground when they are motionless.

Picture 1

A woman is representing hand flowers (hand gesture)



Photo from Subashini Pathmanathan, "Flower Garlands in Indian Classical Dances," Daily News: Sri Lanka, 23 May 2012. Web. Accessed (<http://archives.dailynews.lk/2012/23/fea30.asp>)

Picture 2

A woman is representing a combination of Alapadma, hand position having moved from the Katakumukha, hand position with Parshva, feet position, and standing her body in Madala or Aramandi, body posture.



Photo from iStock by getting image, "dancers bharatanayam costumes," web accessed. <http://www.istockphoto.com/photos/dancers%20in%20bharata%20natyam?facets=%7B%22text%22:%5B%22dancers%20bharatanatyam%20costume%22%5D,%22pageNumber%22:1,%22perPage%22:100,%22abstractType%22:%5B%22photos%22,%22illustrations%22%5D,%22order%22:%22bestMatch%22,%22f%22:true%7D>

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