What is True to You at This Moment?

An Inquiry of One's Tradition(s) to Become Aware of Acculturation

by

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ABSTRACT

Global occurrences from the past and present such as colonization and globalization play a part in current realities. With the advent of such events, a false belief seems to have been created that in order to be modern, relatable to the present trend and global, it is mandatory to be Westernized and/or Americanized. This document focuses on the issues behind some Indians' perception of their own culture(s), its traditions and values and how that perception might impact their everyday life. It aims to create an awareness that such a false belief seems to exist and wants to encourage the youth of India to develop their own preferred ways of connecting with their culture and its traditions. It requests and encourages every individual to question and inquire into traditions, practices, rituals, stories, songs, etc.

Since India has diverse philosophies, practices, values and principles and approaches to life to offer, and coming from South India, my first two steps to be a part of this futuristic movement involve 1) studying initial works under Saiva Siddhantham - a philosophy that is unpopular, about 800 years old and believes in godliness as an energy-oriented existence, experience and way of life rather than a worship of form-based mythological characters solitarily, and 2) decoding and analyzing/interpreting characters and stories from mythologies, to understand if and how they might relate to the contemporary world. Bharatanatyam and oral storytelling have been used as artforms to represent issues, and shine an interpretative rather than mystical perspective on historical mythologies. The question "What is True to you at this Moment?" is also sought after as a way of honoring multiple ways of living and epistemologies.

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PREFACE

Global occurrences from the past and present such as colonization and globalization play a part in the current realities. There are positive effects such as increase in transportation, increase in exchange and interdependence of world economies. But there are also negative impacts such as loss of cultural values, domination of certain cultures over others and economic instability. In this document, I wish to focus on one such negative effect – some Indians' perception of their own culture(s), its traditions and values and how that perception might impact everyday life.

The Indian nation contains multiple cultures and cultural practices that depend upon their geographical location, religion of practice, language being spoken, etc. Similar to the continuum of cultures being practiced within the same nation, there exists a continuum over which the country's citizens' relationship with and their understanding of their traditions lie. That is, there is a range over which Indians comply with their respective traditions. There are groups of people who don't believe in the relevance of traditions to today, groups that withhold the remaining intricate details of the traditions that they come from with an intimate understanding, groups that reinforces traditions without an understanding of its need and relevance for today, groups that take part in some traditions that either make sense to them or are favored, etc. The same applies to one's preference of another culture's practices over their native culture. For example, one might enjoy the food and music alone from another culture, while another might prefer to dress up like another culture's citizen, practice etiquettes, speak their language, etc.

Reflecting upon my personal experiences as an Indian, teenage me used to overlook and exclude myself from participating in simple and complex cultural norms such as

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forehead smears, wearing traditional clothing, visiting temples and interpreting stories and songs. Along with some of my peers, I took part in preferring Western clothing, not wanting to speak in my native language when in public, preferring to eat foods that weren't domestic and following what we saw people in countries dominant in the global context do. It seemed and might seem a relatively minor thing, but the repetition over time and by hundreds of people makes a huge difference. Despite the availability of knowledge on how to practice parts of one's tradition, since I wasn't able to relate to those practices and/or their purposes, also because our previous generations couldn't provide meaningful explanations behind the traditions, the affiliation towards Western ways of living was reinforced along with an increase in dismissal of one's own culture.

Eventually, it seemed absurd to be stuck in-between: neither conscious of my culture and its practices, nor able to consider myself a part of the Western culture. The journey from this in-between state to now believing that I can re-define other Indians' perspectives and mine about my culture and its core belief(s), so that newer, finer, more intricate and introspective multicultural connections can be made, is outlined in the rest of this document.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The romanticization of the West in India began during colonial times and intensified (keeps growing) over time. It consists of preferences that align with particular Western cultures such as language preferred to speak (English), clothing, food, appearances (not wanting to wear forehead smears and bindi which are traditional features) and so on. (BHARVAD, 2014) These preferences exist in a way that overpowers local commodities. For example, the preference for Western clothing has increased the production and availability of the same in Indian shopping centers. Beginning with these physical and/or materialistic attributes, it has also grown towards values, perspectives and lifestyle choices. This so called "need" to associate oneself with the West to be specific is predominantly an acculturation and compliance conformity (McLeod, 2016) to the US and England. While this can be understandable when an Indian migrates to the US or England and the need to belong to that country's principles is associated with a sense of security, (Anitha Joseph, 2020) (Mehta, 1998) it seems confusing when the acculturation occurs in the land of India. This perplexity became a curiosity, and the following literature was reviewed.

A study was conducted to observe the usage of Western fashion items in the Asian-Pacific region by gen-Y consumers. Data was collected from 692 high-income Indian Gen-Y consumers because literature suggests that among four generational cohorts (Traditionalists (1928-1945), Boomers (1946-1964), Gen-X (1961-1979) and Gen-Y (1980-1995)) they are the "most prone to acculturation to Western culture because they are more exposed to the many possible avenues of acculturation to Western culture than other

generational cohorts." (Manish Das, 2020) Findings indicate clear preference of Western movies, countries, fashion luxury items, music, television programs, lifestyle and products and European food and philosophy. These findings are certainly influenced by marketing activities, mass media and peers, but the cyclical nature of demand and supply suggests that there might exist a demand for Western commodities which in-turn creates supply of the same.

The same can be observed in the food industry. A general negative outlook on local food and a positive association of global food consumption was identified. (Das, 2018) Considering what gets displayed in mass media, the increase in usage of the English language in India and what is marketed by MNCs along with the concept of cosmopolitanism is the reason for acculturation in rural India. This heavy admiration of the West often results in a disregard of one's own culture, its traditions, commodities, practices, values and approach towards life. Also, while exchange and unification of two cultural entities encourages diversity, the growing interest in Western cultural practices indicates cultural homogenization.

When taking values and perceptions into consideration, one of the reasons why Western acculturation takes place is the need for distinctiveness:

"Optimal distinctiveness theory suggests that social identity is driven by dual desires: (1) the need for group inclusion and (2) the need for differentiation from others. When individuals feel very different from other members of a group, they seek to reassert their identification with the group; but when they feel very similar to the group members, they seek to achieve a sense of differentiation from others (Brewer, 1991). Need for distinctiveness is often achieved by identifying with a group that clearly differentiates from the mainstream (Hornsey and Jetten, 2004). An individual's self-esteem may increase as the status of the in-group is greater than

that of out-groups (Brewer, 1991). Therefore, individuals' status-seeking behaviors may promote social belonging through simultaneously conforming to the ideal group and differentiating themselves from less ideal groups." (Manveer Manna, 2018)

In this case, the "mainstream" is the way of following Indian traditions, and the group that is distinct from the mainstream is Westernized. That is, in order to be distinct, it can be understood that people preferred to remain unassociated with their "mainstream" culture – their own culture. This seems to be justified by two remarks – 1) the geographical distinguishment that India is in the East and Western countries are in the West establishes the West a distinction from the India's mainstream, 2) since the Western products such as fashion wear, food, etc. are costlier, much more marketed by the mass media, and comparatively less usual or normal than Indian clothing and food, they are considered "different" (from the local perspective) but "inclusive" (in the Western perspective).

A few statements made by the participants from the research study that support the second justification are: "I do not like people to think that I am a conventional member of the general population", "The way that I dress is influenced by the advertising activities of Western companies," "I enjoy seeing ads for Western products everywhere" and "It is important to me to enhance my image to belong to a group with status." (Manveer Manna, 2018) In the last statement, the term status seems to be defined as something that is costly, not easily available, is respected as something higher than typicality, etc.

While discussing marketing and advertisements, it is important to talk about globalization, as it acts as a source for acculturation, Westernization and Americanization. Das talks about two cultural impacts that globalization creates: cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. (Das, 2018) While the preference is towards cultural

heterogenization wherein multiple cultures and their ways of living are recognized, valued and taken into consideration, the reality seems to be cultural homogenization. The cultures and countries that are dominant in the world and/or are considered to be the developed nations also dominant in the global economies. Das talks about this:

> "Homogenization of culture is equivalent to Westernization or Americanization due to dominance of The United States in the world economy… There is an emergence of global brands due to such global culture (Kapferer, 2001; Yip, 1995) and association with such brands represents identity to a global world." (Das, 2018)

Benoist also talks about cultural homogenization as an effect of globalization:

> "But globalization is not universality either. In certain respects, it is even the opposite, because the only thing that it universalizes is the market, i.e., a mode of economic exchange that corresponds to a historical moment of a particular culture. In this regard globalization is only the imperialism of the Western market expanding to cover the entire planet — an imperialism internalized by the very people who are its victims. Globalization is the mass imitation of Western economic behavior. It amounts to turning the entire planet into this market religion, whose theologians and high priests operate as if the only goals were profitability." (Benoist, 1996)

> Thus, a false belief seems to have been created - that in order to be modern, relatable

to the present trend and global, it is mandatory to be Westernized and/or Americanized. (Lal, 2000) Through this research work, I wish to create an awareness that such a false belief seems to exist and would like to encourage the youth of India to develop their own preferred ways of connecting with their culture and its traditions. Alongside, this research work does not advocate blindly holding onto perceived traditions and conventions. Rather, it requests and encourages every individual to question and inquire into traditions, practices, rituals, stories, songs, etc. that are "Indian" and "Western".

Benoist also makes a comment on the difference in cultural philosophies between Western and non-Western countries. He views what he characterizes as Western universalism as that of "having" rather than of "being." (Benoist, 1996) This to me relates to the view that some Western societies prefer "autonomy", whereas the Eastern cultures prefer "divinity" (Walter Renner, 2014) and that some Western societies prefer materialistic gratification over spiritualistic experiences. (Aarya, 2015) The increase of affiliation towards the Western ways of living seems to act as a justification for the depletion of employment of Indian traditions, philosophies, principles and values by Indians. But at the same time, blind, stubborn withholding of the traditions without rationalization of its relevance to today, and whether it is the "true" tradition to be held onto is equally responsible for this havoc.

This possible uncertainty and misconception that certain practices are traditions is the reason why I used the term 'perceived traditions' earlier in this document. In my opinion, when a typical youth Indian thinks about traditional India, he/she/they might associate tradition with the Hindu religion, superstition, non-scientific approach(es), lack of reasoning as to why it needs to be practiced and narrow-mindedness. I suppose that the lack of explanation/reasoning is because What needs to be done has been passed down over generations, but Why it needs to be done hasn't. That is, the stories, legends and ritualistic practices were passed down, but the justification wasn't. Thus, the absence of reasoning behind why certain traditions were followed and created, could have generated a belief that those traditions were made for superstitious or religious reasons - to generate fear amidst people so that those traditions would not be critiqued and would be mindlessly obeyed.

The Constitution of India declares India as a secular nation with no religions because it encourages freedom to practice any religion and is against discrimination of people that fall under minorities in terms of the religions they practice. But the question is – Is it in practice? Is the theoretical claim of secular India true in reality? I don't think so. This is because India's prior name was Hindustan, the land of Hindus. Though the constitution that was created after Independence in 1947 suggests secularism, since the nation consists of about 79.8% Hindus, (Kramer, 2021) the immediate association that most Indians make to traditional India is Hinduism, and/or one that doesn't consider secularism for the true meaning it withholds. (Buddhi, 2021)

Here too, an observation that needs to be made is that Hinduism seems to be predisposed as a religion that contains of Gods and Goddesses, myths/legends, etc., which it does, however, the core truth that is often neglected is that Hinduism is more than a religion. "It is a culture, a way of life, and a code of behavior. This is reflected in a term Indians use to describe the Hindu religion: Sanatana Dharma, which means eternal faith, or the eternal way things are (truth)." (Khan Academy, 2022) (Sadhguru, 2018)

Therefore, nuanced and immense re-search of India's traditions, what each tradition stands for and the relevance of the same to today, and what is perceived to be India's tradition needs to be conducted. With those clear-cut definitions, I think that it is possible for people to feel belonged, distinct, high-status, etc. because of the diversity that each part of India offers. This resolves entanglements between binary choice-making of tradition vs. change/modernization because it is possible to carry one's cultural values and practices into the future as a modern being. (Simon Ozer, 2017) (Bhattacharya, 2009)

Since traditional India has diverse philosophies, practices, values and principles and approaches to life to offer, and coming from South India, my first two steps to be a part of this futuristic movement involve 1) studying initial works under Saiva Siddhantham – a philosophy that is unpopular, about 800 years old and believes in godliness as an energy-oriented existence, experience and way of life rather than a worship of form-based mythological characters solitarily, and 2) decoding and analyzing/interpreting characters and stories from mythologies, to understand if and how they might relate to the contemporary world.

CHAPTER 2

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BHARATANATYAM AND TOPIC OF STUDY

Bharatanatyam is the national dance form of India, predominantly practiced in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Its origination can be traced to the Natyashastra, the first Indian scripture on performing arts from 5th century BCE to $7^{th}/8^{th}$ century CE compiled by Bharata Muni. (Lidova, 2014) The Natyashastra is based on the Natya Veda, knowledge that can be obtained on viewing and practicing the dance form. Legend goes that Natya Veda was created by Brahma, the creator God, and handed over to Bharata Muni for compilation and distribution. The Natya Veda itself did not contain information on the performance methods; it only indicated the knowledge that needs to be obtained when one practices and experiences the artform. It was Bharata Muni who devised the Natyashastra, a "method by which theatrical performances are to be created and performed." (Gupt, 2017)

Before the 20th century, Bharatanatyam was known as *Sadiraatam*. It was mainly practiced by *Devadasis*, which literally translates to 'devotee of Deva (deity)'. The Devadasis were girls of young age who were "dedicated" to a temple and were "married" to the deity of that temple. (Indian Culture, n.d.) The Devadasis learnt Sadiraatam under the guidance of "Nattuvanaar", who were mainly men. During the Chola era (300 BCE to close to 12th century), especially during the reign of King Raja Raja Chola I, about 312 Devadasis were dedicated to the Tanjore Temple – Rajarajeshwaram. (Vanamamalai, 1974) In order for the Devadasis to have independence, and because of the immense respect they had, the Devadasis were given land, money and labor for sustaining everyday life. With change of kings and clans that ruled Southern India, the Devadasis that were dedicated only for the temples, seemed to have been asked to perform for the kings and

other important members of the society and/or upper-class men in the kings' courts. "They lived in quasi matrilineal communities, had nonconjugal sexual relationships with upper-caste men, and were literate when most South Indian women were not." (Soneji, 2012) Over time, the Devadasis seemed to have beens forced to prostitution and "the situation worsened till a time came when even the term devadasi was considered offensive and demeaning." (Indian Culture, n.d.) Adding to this, during the colonial period, the British issued an abolition against the Devadasis through the Madras Devadasis Act on October 9, 1947. (Wikipedia, 2022) The Devadasi system, along with it Sadiraatam seemed to have been eradicated from the society until no trace of it remained in the families who had been dancing for decades.

At the same time, in 1930s, a group of reformers including E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale were thriving for the freedom of the artform from abolition, demeaned perception and non-existence. Rukmini Devi Arundale was born in 1904 to Neelakanta Shastri, an engineer with the Public Works Department who was introduced to the Theosophical Society in 1901. Inspired by Dr. Annie Besant, a British socialist and theosophist, Shastri moved to Adyar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Rukmini Devi Arundale met Dr. George Arundale at Theosophical Society and they got married in 1920, much to the shock of the then conservative society. While travelling with her husband and the Theosophical Society, she got in touch with Anna Pavlova, a Russian prima ballerina of the late 19th century. It was through this interaction that Rukmini Devi Arundale seemed to have developed a passion for the revival of the Indian dance form. She was the founder of the Kalakshetra (a world-renowned Bharatanatyam institute in Chennai) in 1936, and

instituted the Kalakshetra Bani, the last of the four Banis of Bharatanatyam. (Sushmitha, 2017)

Bharatanatyam consists of three major divisions – Nrita, Nritya and Natya. Nrita is pure representation of rhythm and graceful movement through several adavus (basic steps). Nritya is the combination of adavus and abhinaya (which is locally perceived as the art of expression and communication, which literally means to "educate or lead the way.") (Kalyani Kala Mandir, n.d.) Natya is also a combination of abhinaya and adavus, but more importance is given to abhinaya because historical and mythological characters from literary works are embodied and enacted. The abhinaya aspect of Bharatanatyam is generally four-fold: Angika abhinaya - expressing using body movements, Vachika abhinaya – expressing through speech such as songs, music and dialogues, Aharya abhinaya – expressing using aesthetics such as costumes, jewelry and makeup and Satvika abhinaya – expressing by evoking the state of mind of a character. (Indian Culture, n.d.), but equal importance is also given to the Bhava being emoted and the gestures that can convey stories, emotions and conceptual meaning. (Offstage, 2017) (O'Shea, 2003) (Ananda Coomaraswamy, 1917)

The tradition of learning Bharatanatyam is that the student first learns a prayer to the Almighty and the Mother Earth, followed by adavus, permutations of adavus called korvais, gestures that are a part of abhinaya which contain specific meaning, facial expressions (Navarasas) and a margam (a traditional repertoire of set choreography). (Mandala, 2020) (Mondal) The margam that is taught before the student is ready to perform a solo debut (Arangetram) is typically a few decades old. The reasoning behind the creation of the margam is that it indicates a "spiritual path"; (Mondal) but this reasoning seems to

have not been explored or shared with the budding artist. Also, the choreographies of some pieces in the traditional margam that involve abhinaya seem to be taught with basic explanation of what each word being sung means and stipulates subservient behavior on the devotee/dancer's side towards God, rather than what concept an aspiring dancer can carry from that piece, and how it might relate it one's personal and spiritual growth.

Working with and being under the tutelage of Karuna Sagari Venkatachalam, the founder of my dance school Bhakti Natya Niketan in Coimbatore, India, some of her pieces were distinct from the conventional margams. First and foremost, some of the literary works that were used for some of her choreographies were centuries old (rather than few decades). Secondly, the literature of choice didn't express fear-based dedication towards the Almighty; some of them indicated a friendship and rightful arguments between the devotee (dancer) and the Almighty, while some of them didn't involve the concept of a higher-power at all. This approach towards learning and practicing Bharatanatyam felt at ease and organic. It encouraged(s) conversation, introspection and creates hope for potential relatability. The characters and stories that are being expressed in the choreographies are not distant; rather, enjoyable and witnessable in our lives in the form of friends, family and/or through unexplainable events.

Relating this point of view to my research work and my second step in re-defining perceptions of traditional India, Bharatanatyam can be used as an artform that can represent current issues and shine a different (interpretative rather than mystical) light on historical mythologies. Bharatanatyam serves as a language because it contains varied mudras (gestures) for indicating parts of everyday life. For example, there are gestures to show sky, sun, hair braids, horse, etc. This collection of mudras can be utilized by dancers to

express their current-selves and the world that they perceive and experience. Also, Bharatanatyam repertoire pieces from the margam can be considered like any other language-based work and be analyzed. The structure of the repertoire can be held onto, which exploring new choreographies that can take part in the repertoire or form a new repertoire.

These two needs are attempted to become actualize in my research work– 1) The current issue that I am interested in exploring is the acculturation of Indians to Western and American ways of living. Alongside, since the entire research project thematically encourages honesty and inquiry, the question 'What is True to you at this Moment?' is also sought after simultaneously, as a way of honoring multiple ways of living and epistemologies. 2) Instead of dissecting a choreographic piece from one of the traditional margams, I chose to investigate three factors that influence any choreography and its motif: A) Stories/Mythologies and their Morals that are usually depicted through Bharatanatyam, B) Deeper meaning that exists behind the God 'Shiva' through Saiva Siddhantham and C) Relatability that this research project can have with Saint Thirunaalaipovaar (also known as Nandanaar) from the 63 Naayanmaars.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS

The first statement I would like to make is that this research study doesn't encourage complete compliance to any ("Western" or "Indian") cultural practices. It hopes that each individual navigates and investigates their own association with each culture's practices, and finds the combination of the two that works best for them. For example: Certain Western practices strongly follow documentation procedures to ensure the quality of transfer of materials from one place/generation to the other. Applying this ideology to some Indian literary works by interpreting the writing and documenting the lineage it has traveled through would create a new outreach and perspective towards those literary works. Thus, intentions behind every cultural practice must be questioned to see the relevance it has to today and to oneself.

The conception of viewing the first part of the research study as acculturation of Indians to Western and American ways of living was realized mid-process. The preliminary perspective was to conduct a study that aims to learn about "if, how, why, and for whom, an individual might develop a need to conform to broader social constructs" (specifically dominant cultures). (Ramachandran, 2021) Hence, the data collected had imprints of multiple types of conformity – conforming perceptions of an individual from a developing country to the culture of a developed country, an employee that is "forced" to conform to their boss's ideologies and systems, and a dancer's conforming/mainstream ideas about versatility in dance and possible purpose(s) that dance as a medium serves. Since the data collected is in relation to human subjects, IRB was sought after (STUDY00014689).

Also, the initial prospectus for the research study partly involved studying the relationship between self-awareness and dance - especially the influence of dance practices, dance culture and dance philosophies on an individual's self-construction. In due course, the preference for studying conformity and acculturation of Indians to Western and American norms superseded the wanting to research about the relationship between self-awareness and dance practices, philosophies and cultures. This resulted in changes in determining the content that was considered for this bound document.

To understand the relationship between self-awareness and dance, and the intricacies of conformity, a framework comprised of three fields (Philosophy, Psychology and Intuition). The intuition section was inspired by the Intuitive Inquiry process designed by Rosemarie Anderson where she works with 'Five Iterative Cycles of Interpretation'. (Anderson, 2004) This methodology was mainly used during the semi-structured interviews; a couple of the research questions were considered during a singular semi-structured interview and explored in-detail. It was also used during the compilation and determination of content for the research. The motifs for the choreographies, the order in which the choreographies were set, kept evolving over time. This methodology was helpful during those iterations because the five cycles help dwell into a specific content from the data, and look for as many pointers as possible. It also helps come back onto the surface - the bigger picture, to begin another cycle of deep-exploration, and connect one series of explorative findings with another.

The philosophical division contains fractional information from the Saiva Siddhaantham. While initial considerations only involved understanding and interpreting the *Andhakaranam - Manam, Buddhi, Ahankaaram, Siddam* (aka *Chittham*)

(Venkatachalam, 2007), the concept of *Shivam* as suggested by Saiva Sidhaantham was also explored through study sessions with my mother and guru Smt. Krishnaveni Ramachandran. The *Andhakaranam* concept was used to understand the ways in which a "self" (soul) might behave and interact with the world. In the later part of the research study, the possible role of *Buddhi and Chittham* in acculturation to the Western and American ways of living by Indians was also noted. The concept of *Shivam* is highly refined; however, my current perception of that concept and how it can be (is) witnessed in everyday life was explored. My interpretation of the concept of *Shivam* is used to re-define the "traditional" and prejudicial perception of spirituality in India. This interpretation also influenced the interpretation of the legend (story) that got passed down over generations, which is used to re-define the typical way in which a mythological story is considered.

The psychological aspect of the research study involved "E's" of Embodied Cognition as Mark Johnson views it: "cognition is embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, emotional, evolutionary and exaptative." (Johnson, 2018) This concept was also primarily used to understand the ways in which a "self" (soul) might behave and interact with the world. Towards the end of the research study, the cultural information that seems to have been passed down through simple, everyday rituals was considered as cognition that is embedded, embodied and emotional, which can be enacted through the use of movement. I believe that this enaction would evolutionize current domination of certain cultures towards honoring multiple ways of living.

The execution of the framework involved using activities and semi-structured interviews. The activities that I developed over the course of my master's program

education were Walking Journal, Survey Questionnaire and Artifact Elicitation. They involved journaling concealed perceptions of conformity, followed by a couple of semi-structured interviews whose lead questions would have been influenced by the responses from the activities. But, the availability of participants and dancers weren't secured by the time the research study began. Hence, an impromptu decision of conducting semi-structured interviews first and considering the previously mentioned activities later on when required was taken. The impact this decision had over the overall research study is that the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews were purely based on my personal lived experiences. To compensate for this constrictive, singular, researcher-based questionnaire, open-ended questions that suggest conformity of any multiple forms (forementioned) were considered.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the following major research questions:

Q1: How do you see dance being a force that influences your everyday life and your idea of your 'self'?

Sub-Q1A: What do you dance for?

Sub-Q1B: Can you tell me if and how dance has influenced your personality or your character and how you see this world or other people?

Sub-Q1C: Has your idea of dance evolved over time? If yes, how?

Q2: From this list of words, select a few of them that you would associate with your dance experiences. (Awareness, Nuance, History, Morality, Healing, Punctuality, Reciprocity, Consideration, "Other", Memory, Expression, Articulation, Discipline, Choice, Organization and Perspective)

Q3: In a dance space and in general, were there occurrences wherein you had conformed and silenced your voice? How might have you done that?

Q4: What "norms" do you think you follow despite not having interest in it?

Q5: If an answer exists for Q3 and/or Q4, was there a transition from silence to expression or from obeying to resisting/questioning that occurred? What was that experience like?

Sub-Q5A: Do you think that to non-conform is a scary or courageous act that might be impossible sometimes?

Q6: Do you think there is a difference between tradition and convention? Can you give me an example for how you understand them?

Q7: What views do you carry on American and Western ways of living?

Q8: What views do you carry on the traditional practices and values of India?

The participant population consisted of six female dancers. They came from different ethnicities such as India (2), Bulgaria (1) and United States of America (3). Two of the three USA citizens had Black cultural heritage. The Indian and Bulgarian participants had lived experiences from their own countries and from the United States of America.

Since the semi-structured interviews were one-on-one, and considering the diversity of participant population and their lived experiences, certain questions were omitted for certain conversations. Although, to ensure quality and quantity of data, cumulatively, each question was explored in-depth. The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant during each interview. Data analysis was performed after manually transcribing the audio files. The main consideration during the data analysis process was to observe themes that were emerging, and the resonance of

that theme with other one-on-one interviews. (Atkinson, 1998) The obtained themes were

organized to a storytelling format for choreographic reasons. During the MFA Applied

Project Showings, fruitful discussions guided the organization of the themes in a different

direction. The progress made over each stepping stone will be discussed further in the

Choreographic Process section.

CHAPTER 4

THE PATH TO THIS RESEARCH STUDY

My interest in acculturation of Indians to Western/American cultural practices and the relationship between dance and self-awareness didn't come to me before I started the master's program at Arizona State University. It was towards the end of the first year during the Portfolio Review that it peeked. Similar to most international students that associated feeling accepted by the country that they are in with better mental health, (Mehta, 1998) I was doing everything that I could to "fit in". Though I had visited the United States of America a few times before I joined as an international student in 2019 for the final year of undergraduate program, it was during the first year of my master's degree (Fall 2020) that I felt completely immersed in the US "soil".

The fact that most of my cohort and other dancers at ASU knew dance forms that I didn't was initially very intimidating. The difference in dance forms, perspectives, intentions behind dancing, etc. was terrifying. There were days I felt extremely lonely and depressed, despite being surrounded by a lovely group of welcoming and supportive dancers (students and faculty members). In the final year of my undergraduate program, since it was based on engineering, the Western ideologies were already ingrained in my conscious and unconscious mind; it was only in dance that Indian ideologies survived within me. Anyhow, constant engagement with each dancer that I came across, especially a few of the dance faculty members, was not only motivating but gave me the courage to express and vocalize my beliefs.

With the freedom of choice and with the resources that the courses offered, concealed memories of conformity and pain came through. The book 'My Grandmother's

Hands' by Resmaa Menakem (Menakem, 2017) talked about oppression of white bodies over black, and the pain and need for release and healing translated to me and was relatable because of India's colonial history for about a hundred years. I developed a curiosity over the sustenance of its aftermath - If such traumas can travel over generations, could the power, strength and courage to fight against and heal from the past also prevail? The body practices suggested throughout the book upheld this curiosity and shifted it into a belief.

Alongside, learning about the obstacles, opportunities, sources and outcomes of improvisation (Nachmanovitch, 1990) was at the other end of the puzzle. The question "What is stopping us?" from improvising, from expressing, from making the choice, from asking questions, etc. stood out. Revisiting this question multiple times started rupturing my hesitation-fear against my own "truth" and the culture I was trying to evade for years. This was when I came across Swami Rama's work on the Bhagavad Gita. The Gita has often been considered as a religious literature work. Swami Rama's work though was based on the psychology behind the Gita, the concept or "essence" that *Krishna* was trying to share with *Arjuna*. (Rama, 1984) The detachment from mythological/historical characters and focus on the moral that the Gita is trying to convey was the first step towards seeing Indian literary and art works as sources for knowledge rather than tales.

Side by side, I was reading De La Garza's work on her journey into cultural knowledge. (Garza, 2004) She writes about the complexity of power structures, spirituality, decolonialization and cultural myths and characters. Her interpretation of cultural narratives and characters that have been personified in those narratives reignited the spark in me to look back on my cultural heritage. Her approach towards using spirituality as a decolonial methodology was assuring my wanting to bring out Indian

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cultural wisdom, which is very closely related to spirituality. The likelihood between

experiences and cultural knowledge that she has had and I have, made me wonder about

and want to include other individuals that resonated with this subject matter. That is, the

intimidation behind the difference in dance forms, perspectives and cultural wisdom my

cohort and I had, was transformed into a space of exploration.

CHAPTER 5

PIT(D)HAA

Pithaa – One who has 'lost his mind'

Pidhaa – Father (to me, *Shiva*)

During the Dance Informals of Fall of 2021, I choreographed and performed to Sound of Isha's song – Gauraanga Ardhaanga. It is a composition on the multiple ways in which *Shiva* is addressed based on the stories behind them. It is designed as if a devotee is singing/conversing with *Shiva*:

gaurāṅga ardhāṅga gaṅgā taraṅge | yogi mahāyoga kā rūpa rāje

"Goddess Gauri's (Sakthi's) consort, one who has taken the form of Ardhanaareeshwarar, and has river Ganga on top of his head."

According to Saiva Siddhantham, *Shiva* and *Sakthi* are not different from one and the other. They are similar to two sides of the same coin. Also, *Shivam* and *Sakthi* are neither form-based deities of worship; nor mythological characters. *Shiva* is a concept, an energy, an experiential state. Some Indian philosophies believe in multiple births and transmittance of knowledge obtained from each birth to the next. *Shiva* is the Absolute knowledge that is obtained at the end of all births, which breaks souls (selves) from the cycle of birth-and-death. *Sakthi* is the state of pure "bliss" that is attained when knowledge is obtained by an individual. Mythologies and legends contain stories of *Shiva* and *Sakthi* which could be perceived as moments in the past/history wherein *Shiva* (knowledge) was attained, and ultimate happiness (*Sakthi)* was experienced by human beings. (Subramuniyaswami, 2003)

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bāgha chālā muṇḍa māla śaśi phāla karatāla | kāleka ḍhimi ḍhimika ḍhimi ḍhamarū bāje

|| tāḍeka ḍhimi ḍhimika ḍhimi ḍhamarū bāje ||

In this part of the literature, attributes of *Shiva* and *Sakthi* seem to have been used in the form symbolization - You (*Shiva* and *Sakthi)* who wears tiger skin symbolizes the withdrawal of sensual desires. You (*Shiva* and *Sakthi)* who wears Brahma's skulls symbolizes timelessness. You (*Shiva* and *Sakthi)* who wears the crescent indicates calmness and stillness. Through your dance, cycles of creation and dissolution of worldly matters are performed.

ambarāmba gāndhāra digambara jaṭā jūṭa | phaṇidhāra bhujaṅgeśa aṅga vibhūti chāje ||

Meaning: By wearing a snake as an ornament, *Shiva* is symbolizing the essential vibratory nature of the worlds. By smearing ashes over *Shiva's* body, the fact that we take nothing materialistic after our lives end is symbolized.

vāṇī vilāsatūya dātā vidhātā | jātā sakala duḥkha sadāśiva virāje ||

Meaning: Brahma (the creator) and his consort Vani (Goddess who symbolizes education) are writing everyone's "fate". But you (*Shiva*) are the one who ends the sadness amidst human beings. Those who become aware of your (*Shiva's)* presence, are no longer alone.

This perception of *Shiva* and *Sakthi* is the approach that I have carried throughout the interpretation of Saiva Sidhaantham principles that I had come across during the course of my master's program. Thus, when the underlying meaning behind myths are understood, the significance of narrations, ancient literary works and tales to today are realized.

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CHAPTER 6

DETERMINATION OF CONTENT AND CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

Primary set of Ideas:

As mentioned above, the initial research study involved two aspects – 1) studying the relationship between self-awareness and dance cultures and philosophies and 2) studying if, how and why conformity (acculturation) occurs to the dominant cultural practices. Data was collected with both aspects under consideration and analyzed. To talk about the first aspect's data analysis process, the emergence of three major themes amidst all participants was observed – Passion, Introspection and Community.

Passion:

Dance was viewed as a way of being 'passionate' about life. Participants indicated that dance helped them and was a way for them to stay 'curious' about the world around them, the interactions with other dancers/individuals, and the concepts and knowledge that came out of those interactions and curiosity. Some participants stated that the knowledge obtained from those interactions and by being curious/passionate, they were developing a sense of 'right and wrong' or that they were learning the principles of 'discipline' through this process. To culminate the world of passion within the participants' relationship of dance to their selves, the theme of 'priorities' was discussed.

A participant constructed their pathway by which they developed and defined their priorities. They said that it all starts with the experiences and the exposure we as individuals receive during our lifetime. These experiences become 'seeds' of information, and the comfort of certainty gets stored in oneself (*Chittham*) which later gets expressed as preferences during a choice-making stage. The participant also stated that those lived

experiences shape the 'perspective' that an individual would carry over certain aspects of life, which later become their 'beliefs'. Connecting dance as a way of being curious and passionate about the world around them with the origin of this pathway (experiences and exposure), the dance re-affirmed that dance can be used to decide what experiences get excluded/included, what new perspectives and beliefs can be learnt, and what new priorities can be set for humankind.

Introspection:

Some participants discussed the relationship between dance and navigation of one's identities. While one of them talked about the principles that get transferred from a dance teacher through their teaching method to the dance student, a couple of them talked about the traditional practices and the perspective with which traditions can be observed. The question of 'What part of tradition do I want to be associated with?' emerged multiple times; also, "What history do I want to believe in?". While we tried to answer them, the fact that the answer to these questions kept changing after every incident and that one singular answer didn't fulfill the wholeness one can sense by obtaining an answer to these questions was a key take-away.

Instead of trying to list our answers to the questions (because more such questions kept emerging), the focus of observation was shifted towards the nature of wanting multiple identities and/or words that can define our selves. Further conversations helped me create a visual that can help in understanding this process – an ever evolving mosaic. Similar to how a mosaic contains multiple tiny pieces that make up the whole picture, multiple key lived experiences from our time make up our self. At this moment, a picture with singular core element might exist; but over time, multiple such elements might come through,

making the mosaic evolve forever. For example: Imagine a painting with only a house; then imagine adding windows and a door to it. Then a garden might appear near the house. Followed by a couple of trees. A sun might be drawn to indicate that it is day time. Similar to how this picture can keep getting intricately detailed, our identities also evolve over time.

To express the current identity that I use to define my self, and to share the answer that I now have for the question 'What part of tradition do I want to associate with?', a choreographic piece inspired by a mythological story and the analysis my mother taught me was planned to be choreographed. I wanted this piece to serve as a tool to invite audience members to – 1) revisit their cultures and analyze stories/narratives that have been shared with them, 2) hold onto the essence of the cultures that they come, and 3) understand the difference between traditions and conventions and the acculturation that is occurring.

Community:

The final major theme that came out of analyzing the data collected was – community. The participants expressed that dance was a method to share the knowledge that the dancers had developed, a self-expressive platform, a way to transfer traditional practices to today's generation, and an approach to resolve internal and external conflicts. The common thread that existed behind all these themes was the 'need to share, need to invite others to experience the joy that came out of the dancer's experience with developing knowledge/resolving conflict'.

Secondary set of Ideas:

This was the point of time wherein my wanting to express more about the acculturation process, the struggles and courage needed associated with it, the way in which

I recognized and healed (am healing) from it, etc. superseded the desire to share the findings we (as a research team of participants) made about the relationship between dance and self-awareness and self-construction. But there still existed a hope that both can co-exist; and it eventually did. The finalized choreographic process contains six pieces – 1) Struggles of Dilemma, 2) RUAPCR, 3) Nyoku-Paati-Grandma Kathy, 4) Appa, 5) Gnana Pazham and 6) What is true to us at the moment? The video recording of the choreographies can be found at https://youtu.be/wlj66r-a7Fg

Struggles of Dilemma:

Becoming aware of acculturation and breaking free from that compliance cannot happen in one day. I believe that it is a Choice that needs to be made every day; a choice that needs to be made after analyzing one's current behavioral patterns and the inspirations behind those behaviors. It seems that when the 'true' self gets expressed for a moment, the wanting to feel belonged, to feel a part of what's happening around and what's "cool" (Simon Ozer, 2017) drifts one away from the 'truth'. The struggle of power between the 'truth' and 'acculturation' parts of the dancers' personalities is expressed in this piece. The tiresome repetitions and the impact it creates between relationships is portrayed.

The piece begins with the dancers entering the stage diagonally. This setting was used to show the entering of individuals into the world. The movements that were performed were of two main categories – the true self and the acculturated self. The repetition of these two movement sequences was used to indicate the "war" of dominance between the two parts of the dancer's personalities. The courage required to become aware of acculturation and its impacts are shown during the part where a dancer (from the team of three) leaves the stage. The two dancers who are left on-stage towards the end of the

piece depict their beginning of becoming aware of the acculturation, and their beginning

of healing.

RUAPCR:

The score for this piece was one of my poems:

"Overpowered by the volume and density of frightening trees' growth
I seek a space underneath, safe…
Deaf to the cries within
Containing memories of frustration, fatigue and rage…
Enough is enough,
Roared the suppressed
Opening doors to reflect, and memories to support.
Sitting with my forgotten moments
I re-embody what I thought and felt
To understand my stories
And dissolve the suppressed.
From ashes came butterflies
Fluttering their wings…
To heal my wounds
And repaint them as reminders of knowledge"

This poem was written as one of the journal entries of my healing journey. It

involves six stages that I went through, Recognize, Understand, Accept; Pause, Choose

and Respond. I started recognizing that I was conforming/acculturating when I witnessed

a sense of emptiness or lack of fulfillment in trying to "fit in". I felt overpowered by the

huge wanting to be a part of something distinct, that I used to silence my own truth. It was

in that emptiness and lack of content that the truth overpowered my fears, and the "doors"

of introspection opened, containing memories to be re-visited. Understanding why I was

acculturating to "Western" norms through several interactions and explorations, and by

exposing myself to the 'true' tradition that I was running away from, I was able to Accept

the wounds that I had imposed upon myself and heal. The knowledge obtained through this

healing journey was a source of power to ensure that I was getting out of the vicious

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cyclical loop. It helped me Pause before I acted out of habit in the present moment, Choose the 'new' pathway that I want to take up on, and Respond with courage and certainty.

In the beginning of the piece, the X-shaped positioning of four dancers and another dancer left in the middle shows the multiple sides of acculturation – the peer pressure, the need to feel belonged, the need to be relatable, etc. As the dancers slowly move in towards the center, the change in level from standing to kneeling down shows the volume of pressure created by social imprints and conventions. As all dancers face backwards and sit on the floor, the consideration that any and every individual might have gone through acculturation is depicted. The facing backwards position is used to indicate that the introspective healing process is private. The fact that all dancers are performing the same movement in this part of the choreography shows that it might seem like they are "alone" in the process of healing; but that in another part of the world, there is another individual who is going through the same process and are at the same stage.

As the dancers face forward and stand, they are "ready" to express their stories, to move out of habitual behavior and act upon new possibilities. The uniting of all dancers one by one in a corner of the stage indicates the relatability between dancers and the satisfaction of the need for belonging that is possible through interactions, conversations and movement experiences that are possible when we act together. A quick life cycle of a butterfly is shown to depict the journey that each dancer has come through, and the "butterfly" that they have "grown into". The end pose by each dancer depicts parts of this piece that each dancer resonated the most with.

Nyoku-Paati-Grandma Kathy:

Through conversations, three participants (including myself) found a commonality between their sources for cultural heritage – their grandmothers. Through their everyday practices such as gardening, knitting, stitching and conversing, values, courage and perceptions were shared between the grandmothers and the dancers. My grandmother that I am "rememorying" (Rhee, 2020) in this piece is not birth related. She is my mother's guru – Smt. Swarna Somasundaram. She was a Saiva Sidhaantham philosopher, the founder of Tiruneriya Tamil Mandram, a non-profit organization in Coimbatore, India. I had the blessing of meeting her physically during my mother's events, but I wasn't able to learn from her spiritually. Her demise on March 18, 2018, was the day when my perception of her and relationship with her changed. She died in the evening, around 9 PM. My mother was with her, throughout the night. The next day morning, we were going to take her to Perur, Tamil Nadu, to her Samaadhi. The night of March 18, she came in my dream in a mango-mustard colored saree with a pink blouse and said, "I will be with Veni (my mother) and her daughter hereafter." The morning of the Samaadhi, I woke up with eyes swollen, filled with tears and shock. I still do not know why that dream had taken place, but I do know that she is "alive" within and around me. Since the three participants' (including my) grandmother are no more physically present in this world, the next choreography was in honor of them.

As the dancers and I were workshopping the ways in which we want to connect with our grandmothers through movement, Dr. Naomi Jackson's guidance on viewing Eiko Otake's work was supportive. Her choreographies "With Mother in Twilight" (Otake, With Mother in Twilight, 2019) and "A Body in a Cemetery" (Otake, 2020) resonated with the

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ideas we had for this piece. Otake uses a red colored fabric in the second video. She dances with it in a cemetery which seemed as a way of connecting with those who have departed but are "present" in her lives emotionally and spiritually. Inspired by this video, I decided to use one of my mother's sarees as a prop. The other dancers were also encouraged to bring fabrics that connected them with their grandmothers. Also, Otake wraps herself in a white colored prop in the first video. The warmth of memories with grandmothers and the mourning of the loss of their physical presence was felt in this video. So, the dancers and I decided to conclude with this concept.

The piece begins with the dancers positioned at different spots on-stage; this was to showcase the personal connections between the dancers and the fabrics and their grandmothers. As the dancers move towards the center of the stage, exchanges of movement phrases was carried out. It served as a space for sharing emotions and current thoughts about the grandmothers who are remembered. From the center stage, a diagonal-based movement metaphor is used to present the "longing" for the grandmothers' physical presence. At the same time, the dancers are tying the three fabrics together, showing that they are together in mourning and in remembering their grandmothers.

After the three fabrics were linked together, a tug of moving back and forth in the diagonal was used. (Marshall, 2004) This indicated that at times, the dancers remembered their grandmothers in a positive outlook – grateful for the cultural wisdom that the dancers were imparted with because of their presence. During other times, the absence of the grandmothers' physical presence was mourned. Towards the end of the piece, the dancers fall towards the floor, move towards each other into a circle, wrapping themselves and each

other in the three fabrics that are linked together. As they embrace each other, they provide comfort and consolation to each other.

Appa:

This solo piece was an explorative interpretation and expression of the concept of *Shivam*. It was sung by Smt. Swarna Somasundaram, authored by Ramalinga Swamigal (Thiruvarutprakasa Vallalār Chidambaram Ramalingam) in Thiruarutpa, and refers to the universal higher energy *Shivam* as a father. The meaning of the song is:

அப்பா நான் வேண்டுதல் கேட்டருள் புரிதல் வேண்டும்

Father, I need you to bless me with what I am requesting;

I need you to help me understand what I am wishing for.

ஆருயிர்கட்கு எல்லாம் நான் அன்பு செயல் வேண்டும்

To the souls thriving in this world, I need to express, share and act upon love.

எப்பாரும் எப்பதமும் எங்கணும் நான் சென்றே

Wherever I go, whenever it maybe, always -

எந்தை நினது அருட்புகழை இயம்பிடல் வேண்டும்

I need to be involved with and be aware of your grace.

செப்பாத மேல் நிலைமேல் சுத்த சிவமார்க்கம்

In the ultimate state of silence

திகழ்ந்தோங்க அருட்சோதி செலுத்தியிடல் வேண்டும்

To be filled with Shivam, your grace is must.

தப்பேதும் நான் செயினும் நீ பொறுத்தல் வேண்டும்

If I am to make any mistakes, your forgiveness is needed.

தலைவ நின்னைப்பிரியாத நிலைமையும் வேண்டுவனே

The state wherein I never separate from you is longed for.

Bharatanatyam choreographies usually contain aural repetition of lines from a song. A structure is followed during those repetitions in the different choreography: firstly, literal

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meaning of the song is portrayed. Secondly, the choreographer's interpretation of the song is depicted. Thirdly, the concept of Sanchaaram/Sanchari is executed. "Sanchari comes from the root word sanchara meaning traverse or navigate." (Chatterjee, 2016) In this method, a base emotion (Staayibhaavam) is withheld, and an imaginative movement sequence around that base emotion, with interpretative meaning is conveyed through Abhinaya. For example: if the base emotion is longing/yearning, a storyline around that emotion – moments from everyday life like remembering a person or an event while looking into the mirror is constructed. The story usually ends with the longing/yearning being satisfied or the dancer zoning out of the base emotion and the story.

In this song, there is one Pallavi (the initial line or two sung which repeats at times in the song to provide the theme of the song), one Anupallavi and two Charanams (specific words that convey an emotion, state of being or experience). Applying the previously mentioned structure of traditional Bharatanatyam choreographic process, the first repetition of a line in this choreography is a direct translation of the line. Since the audio only consists of two repetitions instead of three, I chose to perform the Sanchari in the second iteration. Although, the duration of the second repetition is not long enough to perform a traditional Sanchari. Hence, mini Sancharis for each line were choreographed. The motif for each Sanchari was to immerse myself in the situation wherein the blessing that the author is asking for is provided. That is, love towards other souls and a state of silence and awareness is obtained.

Gnana Pazham:

To honor the tradition of oral storytelling, this part of the research study was verbally spoken in the video documentation. According to a legend, in the coolest

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weathers of Mount Kailash, resided a family of four – Shiva, Shakthi, Vinayaka and Muruga. The four of them are worshipped as some of the Gods and Goddesses in India. There came a day when Sage Naradha visited the family, to present an indivisible fruit. This fruit was called as the 'Gnana Pazham' which translates to the 'Fruit of Knowledge' in English. The parents, Shiva and Shakthi, loving their sons equally, concluded to conduct a competition to decide, which of the two sons gets to receive the Fruit of Knowledge.

The competition was – whoever among the two sons first circled the world thrice, would get the fruit. Accepting the challenging competition, Muruga started his journey around the world on his travel buddy, the peacock. Vinayaka's travel buddy is a small rat called 'Moonjooru'. Realizing that he cannot take the same path as his younger brother Muruga, Vinayaka decides to take the smart person's way out. He surmised that the world was no more than his parents Shiva and Sakti, and walked around his parents three times. Pleased with their son's perception, Shiva and Shakthi awarded the Fruit of Knowledge to Vinayaka. When Muruga came back, he was furious to learn that his efforts had been in vain. In deep resentment, he decided to leave Mount Kailash, his parents and his brother. The story ends with the parents Shiva and Shakthi and the brother Vinayaka, appeasing to Muruga's anger.

Analyzing this mythology by overlooking characters and seeing the principles it is trying to convey, Muruga could be viewed as the concept of seeking knowledge and growth in every part of the world. Vinayaka could be viewed as the concept of dwelling deep into a chosen singular medium, and looking for the worlds of knowledge and growth within. I think that when characters are dissolved, and the surfaces of mythologies

are cracked open, all that would be left is the essence – the intentions behind the creations of mythologies – the morals that the creator of the mythology embodied during their lifetime that can act as inspirations for future generations. This decoding process could be applied to other mythologies, so that future dance choreographies and interpretation of traditional choreographies can take a newer perspective.

What is True to Us at the Moment:

In one-line, the ever-evolving mosaic is what is true to us (the dancers and participants) in this moment. Major lived experiences such as the death of a grandmother/family member/close one(s), the point of recognition of being hurt, of healing from wounds, of trusting and being trusted, of loving and being loved, of being content in silence, of being disturbed in chaos, of growing and evolving during each occurrence define our priorities and perception every day. This ever-evolving mosaic can be viewed as a spiral. That is, at this moment, the current event that occupies our thoughts, emotions and self is the traveling circle in one step of the spiral. The knowledge obtained from each lived experience is the stepping stone to the next level, the next spiral. The repetition might seem familiar at times, but minor changes due to growth in behavior and perception occur and remains unaccounted. In that minute growth lies happiness, knowledge, bliss, *Shivam*; each experience and moment is considered as a yard closer to Absolute.

The final piece of the research became a cumulative experience and expression of the process and outcomes behind the completion of the MFA program. The performance and the research study in its entirety are "snapshots" indicating highlights from the spiraling mosaic from each dancer's life stories, which hopefully inspires the viewers to reflect on their stories. The choreographic elements covered the growth a dancer as an

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individual went through from conformity to becoming self-aware, the ways in which each dancer was able to connect to their "roots" and their personal redefinition of traditions, and presented the carrying over of knowledge from one point in life to the next chapters through a metaphor.

The metaphor was based on the concept of "connecting dots" and how one moment in life (or one part of nature) can relate to another. The metaphor specifically covered four relations – 1) a stick or a pillar supporting the growth of a creeper, 2) a creeper aiding the growth of a flower, 3) flowers supporting bees by providing nectar, and 4) the bees carrying pollen to help plants reproduce. At the end of this moment phrase, the cyclical movement done by all dancers consecutively indicates the carrying over of one entity (knowledge) from one chapter of life to another or from one person to another.

The last one minute of the piece was a representation of key movement metaphors from each piece performed prior. Inspired by the movie "Inside Out" by Pete Docter, those movement metaphors were translated into puzzle pieces or islands on a big scale mosaic. The continuous addition of lived experiences and knowledge from the same indicates the gradual completion of that mosaic. So, the piece ends with each dancer curiously finding "new" pieces to their "mosaic", and gratefully recognizing and connecting with *Shivam* (knowledge and happiness) that exists behind each lived experience.

CHAPTER 7

HOW PRIMARY CHOREOGRAPHIC IDEAS AND SECONDARY

CHOREOGRAPHIC IDEAS ARE INTERWOVEN

The primary choreographic ideas involved three major themes – Passion, Introspection and Community. The secondary choreographic ideas involved the need for expression of 1) the Struggles of acculturation, 2) a possible healing methodology, 3) connections with ancestors, cultural literary works and *Shiva.* The healing method (RUAPCR) was an introspective journey, and the observation of an ever-evolving mosaic was expressed in the culminative piece (What is True to Us at this Moment). The remembering and rememorying of our grandmothers seemed to have been a connection with the "past" community; through stories and movement, a possible threading of the "past" to the present community was dreamt of.

By personal re-definition of the concept of *Shivam*, an everlasting association between spiritualism and culture seemed to have been explored. By choreographing and performing to the work of Ramalinga Swamigal, my connection with the tradition of India (spiritualism) was expressed and shared with the community. Overall, my passion for bringing awareness to acculturation and the prelude to an ocean of findings that can occur while analyzing mythologies and interpreting the concept of *Shivam* was distributed into passionate creation of each choreographic piece and this bound document.

CHAPTER 8

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE RESEARCH STUDY AND THIRUNAALAIPOVAAR

Thirunaalaipovaar (originally known as Nandanaar) was from the western part of the Chola region. During those days, people of lower caste (like Nandanaar) were not allowed to enter the temple's premises; so they stood outside the temple complex and worshipped the lord from afar. Nandanaar had visited some temples in this manner, and one day wished to visit the Chidambaram temple located in Tamil Nadu, one of the oldest temples with Lord Nataraja as the main deity. Nandanaar worked in a farming field owned by a landlord who didn't allow Nandanaar to go visit the Chidambaram temple. He (landlord) kept giving excuses such as, "you have already taken off of work for a few days to attend family events or tend to your mother in sickness", "finish this work for the field and then go another day". (Sadhguru, 2018) To these excuses, Nandanaar thought, "I will go tomorrow". This is how he got the name Thirunaalaipovaar (thiru – respected, naalai – tomorrow, povaar – he will go).

One such day when Nandanaar again asked if he could go visit the Chidambaram temple, the landlord ordered him to plough the 50 acres of land and then leave. Nandanaar knew that it wasn't possible and went back to his house. Although, he was very certain that he would visit Chidambaram tomorrow. The next morning when he woke up, the land was ploughed to the shock of Nandanaar and the landlord. Lacking any more excuses, the landlord allowed Nandanaar to go to Chidambaram. After Nandanaar reached Chidambaram, he was eagerly waiting outside the temple complex to see the lord. The temple was filled with large crowds of people, which made it impossible for Nandanaar to

see the lord. At this point, the statue of Nandi (the first disciple of lord Shiva) in front of the temple complex "moved" to let Nandanaar see the lord.

The realism of this story is not my focus here; rather, the emotion it is trying to convey. Despite the obstacles that stopped Nandanaar from traveling to Chidambaram, his belief that he "will go tomorrow" was what helped him go to Chidambaram. Again at Chidambaram, despite the crowd, the "moving" of the statue of Nandi was possible because of his immovable belief.

To relate Thirunaalaipovaar to my research study, from the beginning of my master's program, I was not sure what research work I was going to do, and how it was all going to be possible. But the belief that it will happen when the time is "right" and the efforts I had put in by exploring little hints that came to me through the research process was what brought me here to this moment where I am able to write my bound document. To extrapolate the hope I have had for the research study to the works that are possible after and because of this research study, I hope this MFA Applied Project as a whole can aid future aspirers who wish to explore and introspect traditional choreographies and practices and mythologies.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The significance of this research study is that it has helped me to become aware of acculturation within myself and reconnect with my roots in an alternative, logical, organic and faithful perspective. The choreographic process has helped me to express what Truths I hold dear at the moment – the need for a larger population to become aware of and heal from the possible negative impacts of acculturation, to reconnect with one's culture through analyzing, introspecting and believing in values/morals/principles/emotions behind rituals, traditional pieces and mythologies, and to ever-evolve my "mosaic" of identities by combining any and every practice that relates to the self.

Future work that the research study has inspired are: 1) a workshop to help Indian individuals become aware of acculturation needs to be done, 2) the RUAPCR I had come across to heal from acculturation needs to be re-structured so that it can act as a tool that other seekers can use, 3) more mythologies and mythological characters need to be analyzed, related to and performed/written about, 4) writings that break prejudices of Indian spiritual philosophies (like Saiva Sidhaantham principles) and Indian traditional literary works should be carried out, and 5) subtle ways in which profound concepts such as colonialism, acculturation and spiritualism exist in everyday life need to be seen, documented, felt and shared.

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