

# Move in Time: Male Dancers of Indian Classical Dance in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

*Although the circulation of Indian music and dance existed since the early 1900s in colonial Malaya, the aesthetic visibility of Indian dance emerged in a more profound manner with the entrance of male gurus such as K. P. Bhaskar (1952), V. K. Sivadas (1952/53), and Gopal Shetty (1954). These masters not only opened the curtain of male dancing in Singapore/ Malaya, but played imperative roles in creating awareness for Indian arts and culture by actively teaching and creating a variety Indian dances for the Malaysian audience. The trailblazers inspired other male dancers, who entered the dance scene in the following decades. The 1980s, particularly, saw the entrance of professionally trained multi-ethnic dancing men. While Indian classical dance forms such as Bharata Natyam in Malaysia were numerically dominated by women dance practitioners emerging from arangetram (solo debut) recitals, male dance artists stood as highly visible public performers enabled by technical prowess, innovative staging and choreographies, and media and audience support. This paper traces a non-linear historical genealogy of Indian dance in Malaysia by drawing materials from archival study and ethnographic research.*

**Keywords:** *Indian classical dance, gender, history*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper moves back and forth between watching a dance rehearsal and a performance in Kuala Lumpur and tracing the historical development of male dancing in the Indian dance scene in Malaysia. I borrow the methodology of writing history from dance scholars such as Marta Savigliano and Priya Srinivasan, who in their respective writings punctuated the linear way of writing history through performative scenes and personal reflections (Savigliano 1995) and inserting experiences as a dancer and spectator (Srinivasan 2009). Utilising their methodologies, I too present a non-linear history through meaningful interruptions. I interrupt the historical flow by choreographing writing that uses the idea of one watching a recorded visual recording, where he/she possesses the privilege of moving forward, rewinding, pausing, stopping, and playing by means of a remote controller. The purpose is to connect the present and the past, but in a non-conventional manner. I intend to enter an already existing scholarly debate<sup>1</sup> about dancing men in Indian classical dance by offering a different glimpse of gendered practices along this research trajectory.

*Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*, the two most popular Indian classical dances in Malaysia, are represented by multi-ethnic dancers—Indians, Malays, and Chinese. Pioneer dance gurus, professional touring and performing artists, and international soloists emerging from the country are mostly men, although this historical trend is now being slowly challenged with a serious involvement of some female dancers. I consider the historical male ascendancy in Malaysia as a unique phenomenon considering the fact that Indian classical dance in India and elsewhere is usually dominated by female dancers.

The focus of this paper is from the 1950s with the emergence of dance masters from India such as K. P. Bhaskar, who moved to Singapore in 1952 to teach dance (Sykes 2015: 495), V. K. Sivadas, who staged his first solo debut performance in Kuala Lumpur in 1953, and Gopal Shetty, who arrived in Malaya in 1954 during a world dance tour, which began in Bombay (now called Mumbai). I acknowledge the scholarship of Jim Sykes (2015) as well as personal correspondences and oral presentations of Davesh Soneji (2014) and Katherine Schofield (2016), who have pointed out the circulation of Indian music and dance since the early 1900s in colonial Malaya. These sources have highlighted the active movement of Indian artists from India to Malaya and Singapore through the import of labourers during the British colonial period. Since Singapore was part of Malaysia until its expulsion from Malaysia in 1965, it is vital that any writings on Indian dance take into account the cultural movement

in both countries. Sykes writes that touring networks brought musicians and dancers from India and Ceylon into Malaya through Singapore. Malaya and Singapore stood as focal points where some of these companies stopped for cultural performances before continuing to other Southeast Asian countries. As a matter of fact, the cultural and economical inter-dependence between both nations continue till today.

Two primary accounts<sup>2</sup> by Soneji and Schofield show the presence of courtesan and nautch dances as well as South Indian folk dances in the early 20th century. There were also music and dance troupes that visited Singapore and Malaya for performance. In relation to this, Rajeswari Ampalavanar mentions that the Malaya Suguna Vilasa Samaj patronised dance by staging dance performances presented by artists from India. She notes that the famous Kathak dancer, Menaka, and her troupe made their debut to the Malayan audience in April 1935 (Sykes 2015: 499). Although some artists from India resided temporarily to teach music and dance in Malaya,<sup>3</sup> significant outcomes from local training became apparent from the 1950s, which will be the focus of this article. The key development in the 1950s resides on the presence of dance masters, Bhaskar (Singapore), and Sivadas and Shetty (Malaysia) as well as the emergence of visibly powerful male public performers and choreographers thereafter. In discussing gender, this paper does not intend to glorify male dancers and undermine the numerically predominant female dancers' contributions, but rather, this study examines the circumstances that led to the visibility and emergence of male dancers in the country.

## PIONEER MALE PERFORMERS

*While sitting at a corner in the Sutra House dance studio in Persiaran Titiwangsa, I try to contain the urge to move with the dance music. My body becomes restless. I tap my right hand on my right thigh. My torso moves sideways to the rhythm tai, tai, dhi kit tai; dhi kit tai; dhi kit tai. Closing my eyes, I visualise myself dancing to the tune of Ardhanareshvara. In this abinaya piece, Ramli Ibrahim assumes the role of Shiva, partnering a female dance student, January Low, who poses as Shiva's divine consort, Shakti. The choreography contains sensual moments of embraces, depicting the divine union between the male and female energy. Sporadically, Ramli and another Sutra's primary male dancer, Guna, occupy center stage surrounded by female dancers in diagonal lines and in the shapes of circles*

*and squares. In the concluding segment, Ramli and his female partner come together and pose as Shiva and Shakti with their arms criss-crossed on each other's waist. Ramli's right leg and his partner's left leg are lifted up with the sole of the foot touching each other. The gap in-between both their lifted legs allow Guna to enter and gesture as nandi (bull), the vahana (vehicle) of Shiva.<sup>4</sup>*

At this juncture, my vision blurred. I did not see Ramli and January, but Sivadas and his spouse, Vatsala, in a duet dance, *Shiva-Parvathi* and then, the image changed to Gopal Shetty—Radha. Psychically, I travelled several decades back, transported through the decades starting from 2012 through 2000... 1990s... 1980s... 1970s... 1960s... 1955... 1954... 1953. (Stop... Play...)

Malayalis flocked the Chettiar Hall in Kuala Lumpur to celebrate the annual Onam Festival. One of the main event organisers, G.R. Kurup, introduced on the stage a male dancer who arrived to perform a *Kathakali* dance piece. Captivated by the dynamic dancer, art lovers became fond of him. Henceforth, this performer gained extraordinary attention. This is the opening narrative of how Sivadas transformed from a fortune-seeking migrant to Malaya, serving as a clerk at the government office, to a commanding dancer-choreographer on the public stage. In the *Hansa* magazine of the Temple of Fine Arts, Kuala Lumpur, theatre doyen, Krishen Jit, writes that "Sivadas might well have opened the curtain on the tradition of solo male Indian classical dancing in post-1945 Malaysia" (Jit 1988: 32). Sivadas' debut performance in Kuala Lumpur in August 1953 resulted in a huge fascination for classical dance among the Malayali audience.

Sivadas' performance particularly impressed Kurup, a professor at the Serdang Agricultural College, who was also a notable theatre practitioner and a musician. Upon seeing his dance, Kurup endlessly persuaded Sivadas to teach *Bharata Natyam* to his ten-year-old daughter, Vatsala. Besides Vatsala, several other female students came under the stewardship of Sivadas and the population of his students grew gradually. Following Sivadas and Vatsala's marriage in 1957,<sup>5</sup> the Sivadas dance troupe was renamed as the Sivadas-Vatsala dance troupe. This couple along with their troupe performed in various cultural and national events all over Peninsular Malaysia, creating "cultural history" (*Hansa: The Magazine of the Temple of Fine Arts* 1982: 20). The troupe, hailed as one of the oldest Indian dance groups in Malaysia, provided training in *Bharata Natyam*, *Kathakali*, and South Indian folk dances.

Instead of presenting a usual *margam* (repertoire), which was the practice of many touring artists from India at that time, Sivadas introduced certain innovations in his productions. While utilising Indian classical dance and folk dance vocabularies, he also created dance works that embodied localised and secular themes/narratives such as the *Peacock Dance*, *Fisherman's Comedy*, and *The Snake Charmer and His Wife* as well as short dance-dramas on Hindu mythologies were such as *Lakshmi-Narayana*, *Muruga*, *Ramayana*, and *Vishvamitra-Menaka*.<sup>6</sup> These productions (in terms of name, theme, and narrative) captured the attention of the multi-ethnic audience more profoundly.

The Sivadas-Vatsala dance troupe grew popular and went on to perform at almost all state functions and Indian cultural programs in the country. In addition, Sivadas' attachment with the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports at that time allowed him to circulate as a performing artist nationally and internationally until he retired from the government service in 1979. During his years of service as a government employee, he not only choreographed for the Ministry of Culture, hybrid dances, in which he blended Indian dances and Malay folk dance genres, but he also travelled and performed extensively in Thailand, Philippines, Australia, Japan, and London (the UK).<sup>7</sup>

One year after Sivadas' grand debut performance, Gopal Shetty, who took a world dance tour contract in Bombay, arrived in Malaya. At the end of the tour, he remained in Malaya and found a job as an insurance agent. He was appointed as a committee member of the Federation Arts Council due to his past achievements in dance. As a council member, he performed before several visiting dignitaries such as the Duke of Edinburgh, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, and tabla maestro, Zakir Hussain. Gopal's landmark choreographies included *The Peacock Dance* (1957), *Jeevan Jyoti (Life and Light)* (1959), *The Artist's Dream* (early 1960s), and *Lakshmi Narayan* (in the 1960s).<sup>8</sup> As Sivadas, he too employed dance vocabularies drawn from various Indian dance genres such as *Bharata Natyam*, *Kathakali*, and north Indian folk dances.

Gopal began dance classes at the Sangeetha Abhivirthi Sabha, Kuala Lumpur,<sup>9</sup> but also travelled to other states in the west Peninsular Malaysia to teach. He too married his first dance student, Radha Saravanamuthu, a few years after the commencement of dance classes. Radha's companionship in dance invigorated the artistic ventures of Gopal's dance school.

Both masters took it upon themselves to promote Indian arts. They were predominantly supported by the middle class Indian community. Their artistic efforts progressively caught the attention of the state and media due to their privileged positions at that time—Sivadas served

at the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports and Gopal was a member of the Federation Arts Council. However, the positional power, by which they regularly performed at the state sponsored programs and choreographed dances for the Ministry and the National Cultural Complex (KBN), did not privilege them in terms of funding. For instance, although Gopal's income and fee revenue generated from classes offered some form of financial support, it was insufficient to cover the costs of his self-funded artistic endeavors. He recounts one of his performance experiences as follows,

By 1959, I had about a hundred students and that was when I decided to do a show called *Life and Light* at the Town Hall. It was self-financed and I think I spent about \$20,000. We played to packed houses, but I lost everything. To cover my losses, I sold my sports car and whatever else I could dispose of ... it was a bitter experience that I vowed never to dance. (Shetty 1988: 51)

Yet, despite their financial limitations, both masters attained wider popularity with the support of the media. Television dancing was the rage of the late 1960s and 1970s. The Malaysian Television broadcasting, which began in 1963, offered instant name and fame to both artistic directors. Sivadas' Troupe and Gopal's school were featured regularly on Television Malaysia. Both groups presented variety shows that included classical, semi-classical, folk, and hybrid Malaysian dances. Gopal choreographed and produced two dance programs entitled *Dayana* and *Serbanika*. *Dayana*, which featured a combination of different genres of Malaysian dances, that were successfully aired on national television for two years from 1964–1965 (Vatsala 2016).

Bhaskar, hailed as "one of Singapore's first classical Indian dance instructor" (Sykes 2015: 495), originated from Kerala. He made tours with his dance troupe to places such as the Middle East and Africa during the Second World War. While on his way to Australia in 1952, he stopped in Singapore and stayed on. He established Bhaskar's Academy of Dance and taught dance in Singapore and Malaysia. After his marriage to Santha Bhaskar, a Keralan dancer and choreographer, the institution moved more vigorously by teaching and performing dance. Bhaskar and Santha also regularly performed with Sivadas and Vatsala in Malaya. After Singapore separated from Malaysia, the Bhaskars concentrated on artistic works in Singapore through Bhaskar's Arts Academy and established Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society in 1988. He was the founding chairman of the Dance Advisory Committee under the Ministry of

Culture as well as a member of the People's Association, the National Theatre Trust, the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, the National Theatre Club and the Singapore Arts Federation.<sup>10</sup>

Although Indians were ethnically and politically minority, their dance forms attained aesthetic visibility under the masters. Even though Indian dance was not accorded the patronage given to the Malay dance forms, the artistic labor of these versatile men was seen as exceptional. Sivadas and Shetty were described in media reports as "lending their craftsmanship to the making of Malaysian dances" (Jit 1988: 33), appreciated for creating dances that blended different ethnic dances in Malaysia and for incorporating different genres of dances in a single production in the format of variety shows.

When Sivadas and Gopal were carving name for themselves in the field of Indian dance in Malaya/Malaysia between 1950 and 1980, very few female dance practitioners emerged as artistic directors and principals of their own dance institutions. They included the "Thiruchendur Sisters" in Kuala Lumpur who stopped offering classes in the late 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, dance institutions led by women such as the Usha-Prema Dance School, Padmini Dance Group, and Tanjai Kamalaa-Indira (TKI) Dance Academy came into existence. Again, the former two schools ceased operation after several years, but the latter, TKI, thrived and emerged as one of the leading Indian classical dance institutions in the country. The point is that although women predominate numerically, their dance career is either short-lived or most of these women do not gain as much popularity and visibility as the male *gurus*. For some, their labour remains invisible or hidden, thus, allowing men to be hyper visible in the media and public performance spaces.

At this juncture, I would like to highlight two pivotal developments between the 1950s and 1970s; firstly, the popularity of variety shows that encapsulate Indian folk dances, classical dances, and dance-dramas. This was the common format of Indian dance performances before the late 1970s. A *Bharata Natyam margam* (repertoire) was not presented by dance schools except for *arangetram* (solo debut) performances. Sivadas and Gopal Shetty's schools staged short (twenty or thirty minutes) dance-dramas, variety dance shows, and occasionally presented single rhythmic dance items, such as *Jatiswaram* and *Tillana*. Although the dance institutions that emerged in the 1960s focused on *Bharata Natyam*, the training heavily relied on "filmic" dancing (dances from Tamil movies) and film songs. Zamin

Haroon, who emerged as a distinguished *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* dance practitioner in the 1970s and adopted the Hindu name, Chandrabhanu, sheds light to this scenario by saying that,

Pure classical dancing was not well received. As such, teachers teach classical and film dances. For instance, when the famous actress/dancer, Vyjayantimala Bali came to Malaysia after the release of the Hindi movie, *Sangam* in the late 1960s, she presented a pure classical dance recital at the Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur. I did not attend the performance but I heard it caused riots; people threw Pepsi bottles. I think people wanted to see film dancing since she was an actress. (Chandrabhanu 2011)

Secondly, the teacher-student conjugal union in dance influenced performances. The husband-wife alliance popularised Indian dance through duet dances choreographed from popular Hindu mythological narratives (with always already embedded heterosexual themes and characterisations) such as *Lakshmi-Narayana* and *Shiva-Parvati* and secular stories such as *The Hunter and His Wife*. The presence of the male dancers with their respective wives (Sivadas-Vatsala and Gopal-Radha) on stage was viewed with pleasure as it did not unsettle heteronormativity, which from the 1980s onwards became an issue of concern with the increasing presence of gay male dancers in the dance scene. Furthermore, the powerful rendition of male dancing in duet and group performances enticed other male enthusiasts to become dancers in the following decades. Chandrabhanu, who had his initial dance training at the Usha-Prema Dance School between 1957 and 1973, explains that he became more inclined towards Indian classical dance after watching the performances of the pioneer masters on T. V. Chandrabhanu later migrated to Melbourne, Australia, where he met Ramli Ibrahim, who was pursuing his Degree in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Western Australia in Perth. (Pause... Fast forward...)

*The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna premiered at a packed auditorium in Kuala Lumpur in 2004, where I was sitting among hundreds of multi-ethnic spectators. The 2004 Divine Encounters, which featured a margam that celebrated deity Krishna, was a collaborative effort of nine dancers, made up of three generations of male dancers in Malaysia. This production*

*stood out as the biggest collaborative work between dance gurus. Male dancers in groups of two, three, and four offered the audience a glimpse of an array of movement styles. Each dancer marked his individuality in his own distinct way. This production focused on tandava (masculine) aspect through an "andocentric" dance theme and content as well as abstract movement vocabularies. The exhaustive rhythmic sequences demonstrated the dancers' vitality and resilience. They travelled rapidly across the stage with non-repetitive but symmetrical movements. Energy surged through the coordination of arms and footwork. The expressive segment was rendered through frontal display of bodies predominantly, while the rhythmic dance sequences illuminated vigorous display of motion and shape. Sutra's trademark movements that bring bodies in close contact with each other were rarely visible. Dancers maintained a distance; there was no lifting, or leaning. It was only when the men assembled together to create a single configuration or to highlight the iconic image of deity, Krishna, that the bodies made contact. These contacts by and large involved large groups and occasionally group of three or four dancers. The non-expressive sections surpassed the emotions and "softness" in the lyrical section since the latter moved rather quickly without an overtly dramatic display of the yearning nayika. The selection of songs as well as the content of the repertoire reflected a form of emboldened masculinity onstage.<sup>11</sup> (Stop... Rewind...)*

## **MULTI-ETHNIC MALE DANCERS**

Male dancing gained impetus in the 1980s, a milestone decade in the development of *Bharata Natyam*. Not only did some male dancers model the success of pioneer masters, but Indian men were strongly influenced by the South Indian cinema, namely the Telugu movie, *Sagara Sangaman*, released in 1983 and dubbed into Tamil as *Salangai Oli* with celebrated film artist, Kamal Haasan, in the leading role as a multi-talented dancer. This decade witnessed the departure for training and entrance of professionally trained Indian and non-Indian *Bharata Natyam* male dancers into the public performance scene in Malaysia.

Besides Chandrabhanu and Ramli Ibrahim who received formal training in India and performed professionally in Malaysia in the early 1980s, male dancers of Indian descent such as Guna, Dennis Shambumani, Sri Anand, Sri Ganeson, Chandramohan Ramasamy, and Natarajan Muniandy departed one after the other to pursue *Bharata Natyam* dance training under illustrious dance *guru*, Adyar K. Lakshman, in South India. These men established their own dance institutions in Malaysia upon their return from India. Mavin Khoo and Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, who initially received training at the Sutra Dance Theatre, also made similar journeys a decade later. Mavin Khoo emerged as an international soloist and Ajith Dass became one of the most sought after *Bharata Natyam* exponents.

These formally trained men deviated from their predecessors by advocating *margam* format in their productions, but retained to a large extent duet and group performances (as described in the two dance scenes in *italic*) either due to lack of funding or as a result of artistic choices. Duets and group dances were seen as visually appealing on large proscenium stages in Malaysia. Moreover, the presence of multi-ethnic casts in *Odissi* and *Bharata Natyam*, transcending ethnic and religious boundaries in Malaysia, became apparent and one of the crucial selling points since the 1980s, particularly, in the productions of Sutra Dance Theatre. While the principal choreographers and artistic directors were men, their collaborators and performers were mostly women. In contrast to most female practitioners who switched role from public performers to dance teachers after *arangetram* or marriage, male artists' life span as performers were usually longer, allowing the growth of patriarchal power, access, and visibility in public performance spaces.

## TRAINING, PERFORMANCE, AND POLICING OF SEXUALITY

The proliferation of male dancers in Indian classical dance in Malaysia also influenced the dance training. I recall Indian dance scholar, Hari Krishnan's (2009) elucidation about how the refashioning of the nationalised dance, *Bharata Natyam*, from devadasi dance, *sadir*, in the 1930s reverberated a parallel concern for the nurturing of a new masculinity in South India. He suggests that *Bharata Natyam*, popularised as a form that embodied "devotional, narrative, and non-erotic repertoire" (Krishnan 2009: 384), could have been devised to allow space for the male performer. In line with this aspiration, Krishnan elaborates that Kalakshetra, which was founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936, created specific movement aesthetics for male students through hybrid dance technique drawn from *Kathakali* and *Bharata Natyam*.

As Krishnan highlighted in his essay, the concern for nurturing masculinity in Indian classical dance also influenced the dance scene in Malaysia, particularly since the late 1970s, due to the growth in the number of male dancers. Although Indian classical dance does not espouse pedagogical difference between male and female dancers, representation of masculinity and the question of sexuality surfaced with the emergence of gay male dancers. Sexuality was not openly discussed, but that did not mean it was ignored.

Leading dance institution, the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) Kuala Lumpur, which was established in 1981, has shown the highest enrolment of male students of Indian classical dance in the country. It has made several concessions for male dancers such as incorporating longer non-expressive rhythmic segments in dances, specially commissioned masculine pieces in repertoires, selection of androcentric songs, and "set" rather than improvisational *abinaya* training. In the 1980s, ToFA produced a new generation of male dancers trained directly by the dance directors, Sivadas and Gopal Shetty, and their wives. Talented male dancers were handpicked, trained, and groomed in various forms of dances that enhanced their dancing capability and flexibility. They were not only given opportunities to perform in group dances, but were also casted in protagonists and main supporting roles in dance-dramas produced annually by ToFA. Shankar Kandasamy, Umesh Shetty, Ravi Shetty, Abdullah Bin Abdul Hamid, and Nimal Raj have now become dance *gurus* and choreographers, and continue to train the current generation of young male dancers.

Sutra Dance Theatre also embarked on efforts to promote male dancing in Malaysia. Sutra, which initiated *Boys in Bharata Natyam* with three male dancers in 1993, subsequently worked on a project that brought male dance practitioners together to share the stage in a single production. Seven male dancers from all over Malaysia and Singapore were invited to perform at Sutra's Amphitheatre in 2002. Its success led to the subsequent production of *The Divine Encounters* with a more dynamic cast of nine Malaysian male dancers, including Chandrabhanu, in 2003. In an ensuing write-up in the MyDance Alliance<sup>12</sup> on-line newsletter, *The Divine Encounters* was listed under the main theme—"Those Man Enough" and was described as a "provocative" series presented by Malaysian male dancers. It states,

In spite of the general social stigmas and lack of encouragement, Malaysia continues to produce exciting male Bharata Natyam dancers who have taken the challenge of making their *presence felt* in spite of society's pressures to do otherwise. (my emphasis)

The stigma of dance as effeminate and perceptions of dancing as not a viable option to earn money have constantly posed barriers in encouraging men to pursue dance as a serious profession in Malaysia. Despite facing these challenges, a handful of male dancers have continued to be visible as public performers, enabled by the Indian classical dance collaborative works such as *The Divine Encounters*. These series presented the spectacle of male dancing. According to the artistic director, Ramli Ibrahim, *Divine Encounters* was conceived to boost male dancing in Malaysia and dispel the link between Indian dance and effeminacy. *The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna* in 2004 featured three generations of male dancers from Malaysia, from Ramli Ibrahim to those who came after him such as Guna, Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, Dennis Shambumani, Natarajan Muniandy, and Santiago Samathanam. Besides these dance *gurus*, who own and manage dance institutions in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, and Ipoh, this production also introduced budding younger male dancers such as Parveen Nair, Vasanth Santiago, and Jagathesywara Goopaalan.

The policing of sexuality by the pro-Islamic state and community at large in Malaysia poses constraints for dancing men and women. Despite their sexual identity off the stage, dancing men undergo pressure to enact heteronormative masculinity on the stage. Masculinity is staged through male-oriented dance narratives, lengthened abstract movement vocabularies that require sustainable energy and stamina, and through the mediation of female bodies (in duet or group dances). Even in the all-male cast *Divine Encounters* series, although the absence of female dancers allowed for homo-social bonding between male dancers, this bonding did not project homosexuality. Masculinity was epitomised through poses, movements, energy level, performance endurance, and distancing of dancing bodies. *The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna* garnered nationwide support through sponsorships and ticket sales and went on a five-month tour to various cities in the west Peninsular Malaysia and was subsequently broadcasted by the Malaysia's leading cross-media group, ASTRO TV services, in 2005. These efforts led to another major development in 2012 where Malaysia was given the honor to host the *Joined in Dance—Nartaka Dance Festival* (Male Dancer Festival)<sup>13</sup> in Kuala Lumpur. This international festival brought together male dancers from various parts of the world. As a serious promoter of male dancing, Sutra continued to host the Male Dancers Festival in 2016 and 2017.

Apart from the frequency of media coverage on male dancers and their artistic projects, men's visibility and domination on-stage could be analysed in relation to the role played by women. Some female dance practitioners turn to male dancers to collaborate,

choreograph, and conduct *nattuvangam* (cymbals) for their productions. Besides the dependence, the policing of female bodies to enforce values of respectability sometimes tends to relegate female performers to the private sphere as *gurus*, who perform labor backstage or off-stage, rendering relatively more visibility to men.

## CONCLUSION

This paper begins by tracing the pioneering contributions of Bhaskar, Sivadas, and Gopal, who laid the foundation for the growth of Indian dances in Malaysia. Following the trail set forth by these *gurus*, the phenomenon of male dancing continued with a greater intensity in the 1980s and the following decades with the emergence of diversely trained multi-ethnic dancing men. I discuss that even though practitioners of Indian dance meet various challenges in terms of lack of arts funding and policing by the state and community, men are more vigorous in marketing, securing sponsorships, seeking media support, and creating innovative choreographic strategies. Not only are some of these men already versatile in terms of staging and choreographing, but the policing of female sexuality through scrutiny of dance partnerships and women's appearance in public spaces and the dependence by some women on the artistic support of men increase the visibility and role of male dance practitioners. The female practitioners' artistic immobility, hence, allows the numerically trivial men to dominate the Malaysian stages and the media from the moment Indian classical dances became perceptible in Malaysia.

## NOTES

1. Anne Marie Gaston (1996), Janet O'Shea (2007), Royona Mitra (2009; 2015), Hari Krishnan (2009), Mohan Khokar and Ashish Khokar (2011), Anusha Kedhar (2011), and Priya Srinivasan (2003; 2012).
2. Schofield mentions the presence of courtesan and nautch dances before the 1930s in the Straits Settlements, while Soneji illuminates the existence of South Indian folk dances in the villages in Malaya.

3. Rajakrishnan Ramasamy states Malayan Indians established sabhas and sangam (cultural organisations) and developed intensive cultural and religious contacts with India, which resulted in a steady flow of religious and social leaders, visitors, and artists to Malaya. This is because according to him, middle class Indian parents were keen on providing music and dance education as means to perpetuate cultural traditions and identity in the community (Ramasamy 1988: 140).
4. This scene has been extracted from my PhD dissertation titled "Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia," submitted to the University of California, Riverside, in 2012.
5. In an interview for this study, Vatsala pointed out that the marriage saved her dancing career. Her partnership with Sivadas during dance productions created much dispute between her family members and relatives. As a result, Vatsala's father urged Sivadas to marry Vatsala.
6. These productions were staged between 1955 and 1960.
7. The information for this section was gathered variously from ethnographic interviews, photo albums, and written sources.
8. These productions were staged between 1957–early 1960s.
9. Ceylonese Tamils founded the Sangeetha Abhivirithi Sabha (the music Sabha) in June 1923 to promote Indian classical music, drama, and classical dance.
10. For more details, see <http://www.bhaskarsartsacademy.com/people/founder/>.
11. This scene has been extracted from my PhD dissertation titled "Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia," submitted to the University of California, Riverside, in 2012.
12. MyDance Alliance is the Malaysian chapter of the World Dance Alliance.
13. Nartaka Dance Festival is an annual international dance festival that showcases male Bharata Natyam dancers in Chennai. Ramli Ibrahim, Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, and Shankar Kandasamy are regularly featured Malaysian male dancers at the festival. In 2012, Sutra Dance Theatre was given the thrust and honor to host the festival in Malaysia.

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