

**BHARATA NATYAM TRAINING AT THE TEMPLE OF FINE ARTS:  
PRE-ARANGETRAM, ARANGETRAM AND POST- ARANGETRAM**

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**CULTURAL CENTRE  
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**2019**

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**RGK 130001**

**DESSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER  
IN PERFORMING ARTS (DANCE)**

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## Abstract

### **Bharata Natyam Training at the Temple of Fine Arts: Pre-Arangetram, Arangetram and Post- Arangetram**

Solo debut recital called arangetram is an essential part of training in Indian classical dance, particularly, Bharata Natyam. Years of training in Bharata Natyam usually culminates with the staging of the major and sometimes “spectacle” recital, arangetram. While it is looked upon as a means to introduce the dancer to the public and launch his/her dance career, scholars of Indian dance have variously argued that arangetrams often lead to the degeneration of dance careers. However, I do not see this trend in my study which focuses on *Bharata Natyam* training at the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA). The TFA Kuala Lumpur was inaugurated in 1981 by its patron, the late His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati. It is one of the leading institutions of Indian classical dances in Malaysia. TFA has branches in Penang, Johor Bahru, Malacca in Malaysia as well as branches in other countries such as Singapore, Colombo in Sri Lanka, Perth in Australia, Coimbatore and Chennai in Tamil Nadu, South India and in New Zealand. *Bharata Natyam* is the oldest and most popular Indian classical dance form taught in TFA for more than three decades now. Not only is the training unique as it adheres to the traditional *guru-sishya* relationship despite institutional training that is based on exams, it also provides a pathway for students to emerge as soloists and choreographers through different platforms. This study will trace that pathway by focusing on phases of pre-arangetram, arangetram, and post-arangetram. While this study highlights challenges and problems in launching a career as a performer and choreographer in Indian classical dance in Malaysia, it will also demonstrate how arangetram is a gateway that helps to shape one as a public performer. TFA goes one step further and provides a platform for its graduates to emerge as soloists, group performers, and choreographers, continuously nurturing the artistic growth of its students. In this dissertation, I will examine the training methods that culminate with TFA arangetram and further investigate what happens to dancers at post-arangetram phase by looking at several dance performances. This study draws materials from ethnographic research conducted with teachers, graduates of TFA, students, parents and management.

## Abstrak

# **Bharatanatyam di Temple of Fine Arts: Pra-arangetram, Arangetram dan Pasca-Arangetram**

Sebuah persembahan resital solo debut yang dikenali sebagai arangetram merupakan dasar yang penting dalam pembelajaran tarian klasik India terutamanya Bharata Natyam. Proses pembelajaran yang panjang, biasanya diakhiri dengan sebuah kemuncak persembahan utama yang kadangkala dipanggil “*spectacle*” resital, arangetram. Sementara melihat kepada tujuan untuk memperkenalkan penari kepada masyarakat atau permulaan kerjaya seseorang penari Bharata Natyam, sesetengah cendekiawan tarian India berhujah dan berpendapat arangetram seringkali membawa kepada kemerosotan. Walaubagaimanapun, saya tidak lihat perhubungan ini berlaku dalam kajian saya yang memfokus kepada arangetram di Temple of Fine Arts (TFA). TFA Kuala Lumpur telah dirasmikan pada tahun 1981 oleh Swami Shantanand Sarawasti. TFA boleh dikatakan salah satu institusi terkemuka tari klasik India di Malaysia. TFA mempunyai cawangan di Pulau Pinang, Johor Bahru, dan Melaka manakala di luar negara adalah di Singapura, Colombo Sri Lanka, Perth Australia, Coimbatore dan Chennai Tamil Nadu India dan di New Zealand. *Bharata Natyam* merupakan bentuk tarian yang tertua dan paling popular diajar di TFA lebih dari 30 tahun lagi. TFA bukan sahaja sama seperti latihan institusi luar yang menjadikan peperiksaan sebagai dasar dalam pengajian tetapi unik dalam pengamalan perhubungan guru-sishya. Tambahan itu, TFA juga menyediakan laluan kepada pelajar untuk mengembangkan bakat mereka sebagai panari solo dan koreografer melalui platform yang berbeza. Kajian ini akan memfokus kepada peringkat pra-arangetram, arangetram dan pasca-arangetram. Walaupun kajian ini memberi penekanan kepada cabaran dan masalah dalam menceburi kerjaya sebagai seorang penari dan koreografer tarian klasik India, dalam masa yang sama akan menunjukkan bagaimana arangetram boleh menjadi hala tuju dalam membentuk *public performer*. TFA melangkah ke hadapan dengan menyediakan platform dalam memperkembangkan sayap mereka sebagai penari solo, penari berkumpulan dan

koreografer dengan memupuk pertumbuhan seni artistik secara berterusan. Dalam disertasi ini, saya akan mengkaji dan meneliti kaedah latihan persembahan arangetram TFA dan membuat pengkajian yang mendalam tentang apa yang vi

telah dilakukan oleh graduan TFA di peringkat pasca-arangetram melalui beberapa kajian kes persembahan. Kajian ini merupakan kajian etnografi yang melibatkan guru-guru, graduan-graduan dari TFA, pelajar-pelajar, ibu-bapa dan pihak pengurusan.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Om Gurubhyo Namaha. My humble respects to my spiritual guru H. H. Swami Shantanand Saraswati. I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Premalatha Thiagarajan for her support and guidance and not giving up on me.

I would like to express my appreciation to Prof. Dr, Anis Mohd. Nor for his lectures that opened a realm into the artistic sphere.

My gratitude to my dance guru Santha Bhaskar and all gurus who showered me with love and guidance throughout this journey.

A special thanks to Dr. Muralitharan Pillai, who encouraged me to continue with my studies at University of Malaya.

My heartfelt thanks you to my course-mates, Santha and Jyotsna for their motivational support in my trying moments.

I want to thank all the Temple of Fine Arts teachers and management for their assistance.

Last but not least this journey would not have been possible without the support of my family both emotionally and financially. With gratitude I thank them.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

This study examines the *Bharata Natyam* training that surrounds the solo dance debut recital, *arangetram*, at the Temple of Fine Arts (hereafter, TFA), Kuala Lumpur. In Tamil, *arangam* means a stage and *etram* means ascending, thus *arangetram* literally means ascending the stage. It refers to the graduation ceremony where the guru presents his or her pupil to the public. Gaston (1996) traces its origins to the *devadasi* (temple dancer) tradition. This is a tradition that is adopted and practiced by dance schools globally. In Malaysia, the *arangetram* is presented by many well-established dance schools.

TFA was established in 1981. While most students come to TFA to train in this art form as an extracurricular activity, some persevere and work towards their solo debut performance known as *arangetram*. Although *arangetram* is not a compulsory recital for every student of *Bharata Natyam*, performing this recital is deemed as a phase that completes the training. Hence, many students and parents look forward to this phase of training. Students prepare for it physically and mentally between six to twelve months. Even though it is an important aspect of training, scholars of Indian dance, such as Gaston (1996), O'Shea (2007), and Srinivasan (2012), have previously argued that *arangetrams* have not helped in advancing dance trainings or launching dance careers. According to Gaston (1996), *Bharata Natyam arangetram* is mostly seen as a culmination of learning rather than a platform to further it. O'Shea (2007), meanwhile, states that "the *arangetrams*, for many young women, marks their entry into a middle-class diasporic Indian community rather than into the performance milieu, often terminating a period of dance study instead of inaugurating a dance career" (p. 3).

The aim of this study is to examine the three phases of training in *Bharata Natyam*-pre-*arangetram*, *arangetram* and post-*arangetram* with special focus on post-*arangetram* and performance in the arts after graduating in *arangetram*, solo dance debut at TFA. As the Indian art form is rooted in the *guru-sishya* (teacher-student) *parampara* or tradition, the study challenges the traditional *guru-sishya parampara* by examining the institutional training in TFA.

TFA has branches in Malaysia as well as in other countries such as Singapore, Sri Lanka, South India, Australia and New Zealand. TFA Kuala Lumpur is considered as one of the leading institutions of Indian classical dance in Malaysia. *Bharata Natyam* student intake in TFA Kuala Lumpur is high compared to other schools in the city. The 2016 intake for *Bharata Natyam* was 600 students and the 2017 intake was 650 (information obtained from the TFA administrative office, 2017). Students who qualify for *arangetram* work hard to present their solo debut. *Arangetram* practices are usually held daily for one to two months for an average of seven hours a day. Malar Gunaratnam, a senior dance director, says that parents who enrol their children have expressed confidence in TFA's systemised dance modules, which is tied to an exam system. Quality is ensured through this training system,

TFA is an institution that has taken seriously its commitment towards the enrolment of students in Indian art forms. TFA is unique and privileged because it has a strong artistic and spiritual foundation, under the guidance of the late spiritual guru and founder, Swami Shantanand Saraswathi (fondly known as Swamiji). Under his patronage, it not only emerged as "one of the largest and most successful private institutions of the performing arts in Malaysia" (Jit, 1988, p. 63), but also as an institution that disseminates religious and cultural knowledge through various art forms.

In my interview with some parents in 2016 and 2017 whose children were attending the *Bharata Natyam* classes, they conveyed that their main reason for enrolling their children was to inculcate cultural values in them. World renowned *Bharata Natyam* exponent Dhananjayan (2007) believes that “art and culture are two inseparable aspects of human life. All art forms are reflections of human culture and behaviour developed through an evolutionary process and progress” (p. 12). Shankar Kandasamy, TFA’s dance head, says that cultural values mean “virtuous qualities like forgiveness, kindness, friendliness, sacrifice and so on. The Indian fine arts deal with a lot of puranic stories which are moralistic in values with ethical contents. These puranic stories talk about refinement of character, of divine character, of saints and holy people. Through these stories that are enacted in *Bharata Natyam*, it is hoped that it reaches out to the young children of these values”. In general, Indian parents tend to turn to the arts to foster Indian cultural values in their children. *Bharata Natyam* training seems to be a popular choice as it is a physical art form that parents view it as a good balance in the present sedentary lifestyle.

Meduri (1988) has captured the Indian mind and their expectations for cultural integration in the Indian Dance, “Indian dance thus encapsulates both in structure and in content the philosophic aspirations of the Indian mind [...] when one begins to speak about Indian dance, one is entering a philosophical discourse on ethics, aesthetics, and social reality, all at once” (p. 3). The *Bharata Natyam* training in the *pre-arangetram* *arangetram* and *post-arangetram* thus is deeply embedded in Indian culture. I posit that TFA’s parents reflect closely to Meduri’s (1988) statement.

TFA does impart dance training to non-Indians. Malar Gunaratnam explains that though the same teaching modules are used, the modules are taught, where essential *Bharata Natyam* aspects are taught without imposing the Indian culture. There is mutual respect for their practicing religion and the teaching is imparted on a reciprocal

platform. This is one of the reasons why enrolment for Indian classical dance classes in TFA is highest in Kuala Lumpur. TFA gradually devised its own *Bharata Natyam* dance curriculum, standardised across all branches of TFA. This curriculum is unique and devised to provide a structured training for students that enable them to progress until they stage their debut recital, *arangetram*. This training method will be discussed in detail in this study. This study examines the modules of dance training that lead to an *arangetram* at TFA, from its period of establishment in the early 1980s to the current period. What is also unique about this phenomenon is that it is being studied from the perspective of institutional training, where students are trained by numerous dance gurus rather than a personal one-to-one training or group training under a single dance guru. In other words, this study will focus on how the *guru-sishya* tradition, in which this art form is firmly rooted, has shifted throughout the years.

While there have been many studies in the field of Indian classical dance, this study extends previous scholarships on dance training and examines training from a different perspective: *arangetram* in a multi-ethnic country under a privately owned Indian institution. *Arangetram* in TFA opens avenues for interested students to continue learning finer nuances of performances, choreographies and *nattuvangam*,<sup>1</sup> the art of playing the cymbals, after *arangetram*. I stress in this study that such forms of support are necessary to ensure longevity in the practice of *Bharata Natyam*.

A dancer's journey towards an *arangetram*, I attribute as a 'rite of passage'. In cultural anthropology, the term was coined by Van Gennep (1909). *Arangetram* fosters communal spirit through different phases of the *arangetram* training and preparation. The intensive pre-*arangetram* training develops the *guru-sishya relationship* and the peer-group friendships. The *arangetram* event preparation by the parents connects the family and TFA's volunteers to render organisational help towards the event's success. Van Gennep viewed that human beings had the natural instinct to move from one level

of growth to another as I observed the *Bharata Natyam* students moving from one level of learning to another working gradually towards their *arangetram*.

## 1.2. Background Study

One of the earliest texts that mentions dance is *Silappadikaram* or The Epic of the Anklet, a second-century Tamil epic. *Silappadikaram* is one of the five epics of Tamil literature and it contains references to dances and dancing customs of the times. *Poompuhar*, a 1964 movie based on *Silappadikaram*, deals with the tragic love story of Kovalan, his wife Kannagi, and the beautiful dancing girl Madhavi. This movie was an aid that I used to impart the story of *Silappadikaram* to the dance students,

In the third chapter, “Arangetrukaadai” or “the debut on stage performance”, Madhavi gets ready for her maiden dance performance before the court of the Chola king Karikalan. In great detail, the chapter narrates this performance and the entire text has extensive references to technical terms connected to dance and music.

This *arangetram* takes place in the Sangam Age, which spanned from third century BC to third century AD. Its vivid description sparked an interest in me to read the pre-preparation training and performance of Madhavi’s *arangetram* in that period. This information enabled me to compare the pre-*arangetram* and *arangetram* phases with their contemporary counterparts.

From the third century BC till today, the *arangetram* continues to be a systematic mode of cultural transmission. Students learning *Bharata Natyam* learn about devotion to God. Though the contents have changed over the years, the students learn the cultural practices, the morals and ethics that are contained in the *puranas*. Enacting them internalises the values and become repository of the cultural values and practices.



*Arangetram* was perhaps the first *devadasi* ritual to be adapted into modern *Bharata Natyam*. The importance of this ceremony has risen to such a degree that other dance styles without this tradition, such as *Odissi* and *Kuchipudi*, have also adopted the practice (Gaston, 2010, p. 278). In 2017, TFA in Kuala Lumpur initiated five *Odissi arangetram* called Munch Pravesh and the first *Kuchipudi arangetram*. However, the ritual still holds strongly among *Bharata Natyam* students.

Reflecting on my own *arangetram*, held in 1981, I have seen and observed many *arangetrams* of others and have come to question if *arangetram* is the culmination of a dancer's journey. For me, my *arangetram* was a sense of accomplishment after almost twelve years of learning. It was a proud event for my parents, who were not trained in any art forms but were ardent lovers of music and dance. My mother registered both my sister and me for dance classes and made sure there were weekly practices in the house to ensure that my sister and I knew our dance steps and dance items properly.

My *arangetram* therefore was a success of the pain taken by my mother to motivate us in the arts. I was not motivated to take on dance as a career. At that period, the 1980s, I thought that having a job with a steady income was a rational decision to make. My mind was steadfast with the thought that a career in the performing arts would not promise a steady income. Strangely, my *arangetram* became a passport to expanding my dance teaching. In fact, I started teaching in a small way in the sitting room space in my parent's house even before my *arangetram*, with the blessing of my dance gurus.<sup>2</sup> My involvement in teaching *Bharata Natyam* began when my dance gurus had to terminate their classes in Johor Bahru due to immigration problems. As I was one of the dance seniors, parents requested that I continue the classes for their children. This beginning paved the way to me to teach dance on a part-time basis initially and on a full-time basis after I retired from my job.

Teaching *Bharata Natyam* taught me to explore ways to conduct my classes in an effective way. I referred to my dance guru periodically for advice. After my *arangetram*, my dance guru advised me to learn *nattuvangam* and at the same time playing the cymbals and thus conducting the whole dance (Rao, 1980, p. 40) and theory from the book *Abhinaya Darpanam*<sup>3</sup>—a study of the technique and grammar of body movements in *Bharata Natyam*. Further learning after *arangetram* was encouraged by my dance guru. There were no formal avenues for continuity in further learning after *arangetram* at that period of time. Passionate dancers went to South India to learn another *Bharata Natyam* repertoire. After my *arangetram*, I continued to perform in programmes. After my marriage, I concentrated on teaching *Bharata Natyam*. My own experience of working towards my *arangetram* was a journey different from what TFA students are involved now. I did not go through dance practical exams. My dance guru recognizing my dancing abilities and commitment put forth the idea of *arangetram*. There was however regular practice, initially on a weekly basis. However there was no permanent room to practice daily. Daily practice was carried out in my parents' home one month before my *arangetram*. Unlike facilities during my *arangetram* period, facilities presently have improved and TFA has facilities to conduct all preparations for an *arangetram*.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

1. What are the historical developments of *Bharata Natyam* dance training at the Temple of Fine Arts from the 1980s to 2018?
2. How do aspects of curriculum, examination, training, and performance shape the training at pre-*arangetram* and *arangetram* level?

3. Why is post-*arangetram* a very critical stage? What are the efforts taken at the post-*arangetram* phase to allow for continuity and sustainability in the dance practice? How far is it successful?

#### **1.4. Objectives of Study**

i. I trace the historical development of *Bharata Natyam* dance training at the Temple of Fine Arts from the 1980s to 2018.

ii. I examine the process of pre-*arangetram* training that leads to the grand recital, and *arangetram*. This analysis focuses on the syllabus, training, examination and performance.

iii. I investigate three post-*arangetram* dance performances: the first by Hema Sivanesan, the second by Harshini Sukumaran and the third by the Reflection, performed by nine TFA graduates to demonstrate how each graduate gained an awareness of different perspectives from their post-*arangetram* training.

#### **1.5. Problem Statement**

Shankar Kandasamy,<sup>4</sup> the artistic director of TFA's *Bharata Natyam* department, shared his observation of post-*arangetram* growth in Malaysia. He mentioned that the infrastructure in Malaysia does not offer grounds to promote *Bharata Natyam* as a solo performance and a career (S. Kandasamy, personal communication, October 18, 2017). After a *Bharata Natyam* dancer completes his/her *arangetram*, continuing into further learning is a general problem among almost all dancers. Dancers face many issues that hinder further learning, such as committing to academic studies, getting married and starting a family, or venturing into another genre of dance form. An average of five to six *arangetrams* is conducted yearly at TFA. However, the commitment to post-*arangetram* learning by post-*arangetram* students is about 16.9 percent. The total number of *arangetram* from 1991 to date is approximately

118. I calculated the percentage of 2017 post-*arangetram* students by counting the number of students who showed interest in post-*arangetram* learning, which is twenty.

Since TFA has other dance departments, namely *Odissi*, *Kathak* and Contemporary, post-*arangetram* students sometimes desire to venture into another genre for the experience. One student commented that she had been in *Bharata Natyam* for ten years and just wanted to take a break and learn something different. Having different genres gives students options and decreases post-*arangetram* learning in *Bharata Natyam*.

### **1.6. Significance of Study**

Thiagarajan (2012) puts forth the challenges in Indian dance practice in Malaysia. She had furthered her dance training “at the reputable institution, the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) in 1990” and staged her *arangetram* in 1994. After she pursued advance training in *Bharata Natyam* and *nattuvangam* (the art of reciting rhythmic syllables while playing the cymbals) under Suryakala in Chennai, India, she established her own dance company. Her auto-ethnographical writing shows that TFA did not cater for post-*arangetram* learning during the 1990s. Some of the challenges Thiagarajan (2012) mentions are government patronage and financial support, which were available to practitioners of the Malay dance forms but not to ones of Indian dance forms. Financial constraints was another challenge and the artists have to draw funds from their personal savings. Generally a passionate dance student depended on advance training in India. Prominent dance teacher in Malaysia, Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, underwent advance training under the late Adyar K. Laksmanan, a noted dancer, choreographer, and guru, after his basic training in Johor Bahru and Singapore. This is the case with many other dancers in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, the need to depend on gurus in India for training and performance is reducing due to initiatives taken by certain local schools or institutions such as TFA to encourage continuous or life-long learning. In the past years,

TFA has made efforts to provide post-*arangetram* learning that is creating more interest and awareness amidst *arangetram* students. The focus of my study is the training that leads to continuity in practice of *Bharata Natyam*.

### 1.7. Literature Review

This study will conduct a diachronic analysis of the time frame from 1981 to 2018, on a qualitative framework. In this section, I investigate a range of literature on *arangetram*, *guru-sishya parampara*, dance training and performance to divulge my input through the study of the relevance of continuity in post-*arangetram* learning.

The *arangetram* is an initiation of an individual to grow and develop in depth into the arts. Socially, the *arangetram* event knits people from different walks of life into a community, affiliating a sense of togetherness. TFA students preparing for *arangetram* perform a ritualistic practice of worship for forty-eight days prior to their performance, with a fasting on vegetarian diet. The students develop an inner strength to fulfil this worship, which they say helps to give an internal drive to do their practice with positive energy. This whole process culminates in a ceremony on the day of the *arangetram*, Arnold van Gennep in his work *The Rites of Passage* “explored the nature of ceremonies that mark personal or collective changes of identity”.

Van Gennep identified three phases in rites:

1. Separation (when the individual or the group is distanced from their former identities;
2. Liminality (the phase in between two conditions the individual/group departs and the one which they will enter) and

3. Reaggregation (or incorporation), the final stage in which the individual/group is readmitted to society as bearer of new status” (Tzanelli, 2011, p. 3933).

The flexibility of Van Gennep’s theory led me to synthesise with the *arangetram* process, where the student in the worship and practice phase—the pre-*arangetram* phase—experiences a separation from her normal routine and self and goes through a liminal phase before entering an *arangetram*. The completion of an *arangetram* performance is the final stage of achievement with an elevation of status in the eyes of family and society.

An essential theoretical framework is the sustainability theory that hinges on the notion to integrate and prioritise the social responses regarding the various cultural and environmental problems. The idea of sustainability came about in a 1972 report, “Limits to Growth”, issued by the international think tank Club of Rome. The term “sustainable development” rose to prominence through the Brundtland Report, the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, where it was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43).

This formula is applicable in this context as it attempts to unveil the underlying factors triggering the trend depicted in the social scene of dancers bowing after their presentation. Sustainability is an integral component that needs to be viewed from different perspectives. TFA being a part-time institute with a large dance population has to sustain with its existing modules that will bring much benefit to its dance students. TFA has to foster sustainability of the continual interest by the students to progress from the basic level to the *arangetram* level and to adopt methods to create an interest in post-*arangetram* learning. Shankar Kandasamy says that learning *Bharata Natyam*

takes years and letting that come to an end after the completion of an *arangetram* is such a waste, as there is still so much more to learn. A student who completes an *arangetram* has learnt to physically work hard and mature mentally and emotionally. With a structured plan, TFA can foster interest in post-*arangetram* learning that can pave the way to more meaningful artistic endeavours, harnessing a ready pool of talent.

### **1.7.1. Bharata Natyam arangetram**

Thiagarajan (2012) reveals that female performers do not continue dancing after their *arangetram* or after they are married because, for many women, an *arangetram* marks the dancers' entry into a middle-class, diasporic Indian community. Instead of inaugurating a dance career, the *arangetram* is considered as a terminating event.

O'Shea (2007) too points out that *arangetrams*, for many young women, marks their entry into a middle-class diasporic Indian community rather than into the performance milieu, often terminating a period of dance study instead of inaugurating a dance career (O'Shea, 2007, p. 3). The study also mentions that the late-twentieth-century *arangetram*, by contrast, signified amateur accomplishment, often terminating rather than launching a dancer's career, with student and teachers characterising the *arangetram* as a "graduation" from a period of dance tutelage (O'Shea, 2007, p. 154). Notably, the study indicated that the majority of dancers upon completing the solo dance often lack support in taking the next step in their dancing career. Instead, the majority of these individuals tend to focus on family and marital affairs rather than the dances.

Gaston (1996) examines the transition of the *Bharata Natyam* dance form from the temple dancers from the traditional hereditary families to the concert stage of the educated elite. The author questions what changes this transition has brought to the presentation and style of this dance form. Many students work hard to present their

*arangetram*. *Bharata Natyam arangetram* is mostly seen as a culmination of further learning, rather than a platform for it.

Dhananjayan (2004) mentions that one should pursue an *arangetram* only if the dancer is a serious student of dance and has the intention of pursuing it as a career (Pillai, 2002; (Kumar, 2015). Magdalen Gorringe, and Um (2004) state that the *arangetram* for a *devadasi* was “effectively a rite of passage signifying the *dasi*’s cross over from traineeship to professionalism” (p. 93). According to Dhananjayan (2004), the majority of students that pursue the dance lack the passion and drive to enable them to attain high levels. As such, they develop the tendency to stop the dance after the final presentation, as is seen at the TFA dance section. The selection and admission of students who lack passion for dancing could thus be the precipitating factor triggering the escalation of the trend of students abandoning the dance upon completing their *arangetram*. The crossover could, therefore, imply a one-time process rather than a continual one that should be integrated into the career.

Gorringe (2017) gravely expresses the high costs involved in an *arangetram*. The financial costs of an *arangetram* are completely borne by the parents. It also depends on the teacher or institute to work out the amount. This amount can be misused as I had come across a friend of mine from a dance school in Kuala Lumpur, who decided not to present her *arangetram* as her teacher had demanded a large amount for training and even wanted gold. A majority of studies have cited cost as a contributing factor to the increased rates of dropouts from the institution. Thus the costs could impede many students from advancing their dance careers to the subsequent levels after graduation. Besides, certain teachers tend to charge excessively beyond the standard cost. This limits the number of students who wish to enrol for the dances as well as the motivation to advance to higher levels of dance.



TFA *arangetram* started in 1991 with a mass *arangetram* of thirty-four dance students (Refer to Appendix F). It was an effort by TFA's founder to cut costs and make *arangetram* feasible to students. Parents were able to share the high costs and did not have to bear them individually. This trend did not continue as many parents preferred the traditional way of conducting *arangetram*, which incurred expenses that had to be borne by the parent wholly.

According to Soneji (2010b), *Bharata Natyam* was already in existence by the second century and gradually spread to various regions around the globe. Taking the period of its existence into account, Bhagyalekshmy (2012) and Suresh (2004) consider it one of the oldest Indian classical dances. The theory of *Bharata Natyam* has explained the evolution of the dance over the years, alongside the tenets involved in the performances (Sinniah, 2013). According to Meduri (2012), the theory has explained the various distinct features of the dance and their relative significance. This is evidently the post-*arangetram* development. The literature is able to show the various developments that have taken place in the dance and the TFA. All the performances that have taken place in the TFA have been documented, and this will help to keep track of the history of the TFA.

*Bharata Natyam* has evolved over the years, with various styles incorporated into it to enhance its effectiveness. Mrinalini (2011) and Eshwar (2006) consider *Bharata Natyam* a significant training leading to *arangetram*. According to Saha, Ghosh, Konar, & Janarthanan (2013, September), *arangetram* constitutes a debut stage performance by dance students upon pursuing years of successful training. In its literal meaning, Meduri (2013) regards *arangetram* as a completion point in the training of a dancer. According to Puri (2004) and Rathna (2011), *Bharata Natyam* forms the basis of the *arangetram*, enabling students to graduate to higher levels of dance performance.

The above studies put forth *Bharata Natyam* as an important training factor leading to *arangetram*. I agree that, years of training are required to present an *arangetram*. Meduri (2013) consider *arangetram* as an ending. I argue that, with concentrated effort, post-*arangetram* learning can accelerate and TFA is taking steps towards achieving this goal.

### 1.7.2. The *guru-sishya* tradition.

“Guru is a process. Guru is an awakening. Guru is a force, an ever-present force operating” (Shantanand, 2013, p 21). This concept of Guru is an integral and operating energy force in TFA. Operating as a part-time institution, the *guru-sishya* tradition takes on a serious note where students are taught to pay their respects at the start and end of each class. The students are taught to give respect in the same manner as they would to their own class teacher. The only difference, as the students point out, would be the close bonding they have for their own class teacher. Unlike the norm, where the teacher of the student takes on the role of conducting the *arangetram*, the TFA *arangetram* is trained by the main trainer Kandasamy, whilst the class teacher takes on other duties for the student. The class teacher takes on the task of the *arangetram* practice sessions.

**Table 1.1**

**Duties and task during TFA *arangetram* preparation.**

Class Teacher	Trainer
Class teachers share and discuss ideas and choice of suitable dance piece with the trainer	Makes the final decision on the dance pieces, keeping in mind the class teacher’s choices.
Takes charge of adavu-strengthening sessions, in preparation for the <i>arangetram</i> .	Training and choreography of <i>arangetram</i> items.
Overseas the <i>arangetram</i> practices, helping to fine-tune the nuances, such as understanding the lyrics and facial expressions.	Co-ordinating the live orchestra of musicians.
Helps to get the <i>arangetram</i> costumes stitched, and purchase the traditional jewellery.	Shares the contacts for purchasing in India.

### 1.7.3. Dance training and performance

Chatterjea (1996) puts forth how the dance training is integrated with the *guru-sishya* tradition. O'Shea (2007) explores historically the *Bharata Natyam* training through Balasaraswati's legacy and Rukmini Arundale's legacy. Soneji (2010) incorporates Balasaraswati's 1975 address, where she mentions how *Bharata Natyam* training has the ability to control the mind and requires the dancer's humility to learn it with dedication and practice with devotion to god.

Purecha (2003) mentions that perfection in *Bharata Natyam* cannot be achieved overnight and requires austere penance, strict discipline and assiduous and strenuous work to reach the level of perfection. There cannot be a shortcut to *Bharata Natyam*. Training in this style of Indian dance incorporates the training of the body as well as the mind—in fact, the entire personality of the artist. The *Sillapadikaram* points out that the statutory period of training of *devadasis* was seven years and the learning of *Bharata Natyam* takes even more years to master.

Meduri (2008) and Jadhav, Joshi, & Pawar (2012) noted the significant features that singled out *Bharata Natyam*. According to the researchers, the fixed upper torso, with legs bent and knees flexed, give *Bharata Natyam* a perfect and spectacular footwork. Relatively, Jadhav et al. (2012) pointed to the sign language, mainly articulated through the use of hands, face, and eyes, as the key body languages. Besides, a singer and music accompany the dance with the guru acting as the conductor (David, 2008; Majumdar & Dinesan, 2012, July; Coorlawala, 2005; Pillai, 2012).

TFA *Bharata Natyam* training is spread into different stages where classes are conducted on a weekly basis. Body posture and proper execution of body alignment and gestural language are integral in TFA training. These form the foundation to presenting *arangetram*. All of the studies mentioned above present several perceptions on the

*arangetram*, the *guru-sishya* tradition and *Bharata Natyam* training and performance. Post-*arangetram* issues have not appeared in these studies. As such I hope that this study adds to existing scholarship and provides further discussion on post-*arangetram* issues. Kandsasamy says that the exam mode helps to control the training, as it cannot be influenced by parents' urgencies or monetary gifts.

In this study and the related research, TFA *arangetram* students show positive learning outcomes such as more post-*arangetram* involvement, generating more opportunities to performances and finer nuances in *Bharata Natyam*.

## **1.8. Methodology**

This qualitative research method uses archival and ethnographic methodology which makes use of methods such as direct observation, interviews, live show viewing and also reflexive methodology. I have also adopted the descriptive method for my purposes, as it helps to answer questions such as who, what, where, when and how. Incorporating images were used to enhance the understanding of the sentiments of this research. In the last few decades, qualitative researchers in the social sciences began to pay serious attention to the use of images to enhance their understanding of the human condition (Prosser, 1998b).

### **1.8.1. Data collection**

Data from several books, journals, dissertation, articles and websites were gathered and recorded in the laptop and tagged in folders. Data on *arangetrams* was retrieved from the TFA archives. All data was also saved in an external drive to ensure that an extra copy of information was available, just in case some information was accidentally lost or erased.

### **1.8.2. Interview method**

Informal interviews were carried out with *arangetram* students, parents, TFA administration staff and members of ‘Shiva Family’<sup>5</sup> who are the devotees of Swamiji. This process included audio recording of interviews. Interviews were also conducted on questions listed in the interview guide (see Appendix D and E). Participants did however express their experiences comfortably.

I chose the informants, the parents, during the weekly class sessions of their children. I visited weekly and met many parents who were waiting for their children’s classes to end in the TFA corridor. I managed to identify several parents who showed genuine interest in wanting to participate as my informants (See Appendix D for Research Information form). I chose post-*arangetram* participants who have demonstrated their active participation in dance production and have been vocal about changes for the betterment of the TFA dance system. I had e-mailed these participants a questionnaire (See Appendix F) for their feedback. I also conducted recorded interviews in the TFA library, which allowed for greater privacy.

### **1.8.3. Observation**

Materials were gathered from observation, video clippings and interviews. I attended several *arangetram* rehearsals, *arangetrams* and programmes to gain insight into the performance structure. I sat in some *arangetram* rehearsals. I interviewed and observed the practice sessions of the ‘Reflection’ production that was put together by nine *arangetram* students. For a month every Sunday, I sat in the Stage 1 beginner’s class conducted by Vatsala Sivadas, a pioneer teacher of TFA. This gave me the opportunity to mingle with some of the parents waiting for their children outside the class. An event that many students attended was the Navaraatri Vidyarambam. This is an event to reiterate the *guru-sishya* tradition.

#### **1.8.4. Reflexive method**

Having learnt *Bharata Natyam* and having presented my own *arangetram*, which was of a different approach, gave insight into TFA's *arangetram*. My experiences as a dance teacher at TFA Johor Bahru since 1995, and as a mother of two sons involved in *Bharata Natyam* at TFA, enrich this ethnographic study. Both my sons had their *arangetram* training under Shankar Kandasamy at TFA Kuala Lumpur. I had experienced TFA's pre-*arangetram* and *arangetram* preparation. At the time of my sons' *arangetram*, post-*arangetram* learning had not been developed. TFA started to engage students who had completed their *arangetram* as junior teachers and to assist senior teachers in the classes.

#### **1.9 Theoretical Framework**

In my observation of *Bharata Natyam* training leading to *arangetram* at TFA, I link to the theoretical framework utilising Van Gennep's (1909) 'Rites of Passage'. Although it is often used to denote the festive transition from adolescence to adulthood, it also refers to any of life's transitions. TFA's dance passage of learning with exam-based modules, transits a dancer from one stage to the next leading to an *arangetram* that marks a passage to mark and celebrate. This study is important to establish that post-*arangetram* learning can be nurtured to produce a more versatile and professional dance community that has more in-depth knowledge in *Bharata Natyam*, not only as a performer but also as a teacher. More importantly is that, changes to adopt a constructive post-*arangetram* learning, TFA needs to implement a method of sustainability. The term "sustainable development" was coined in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development by The Brundtland Report which defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This

captivated my attention and I found it appropriate that sustainable development can involve the younger generation of dancers.

I will move on to the next chapter to focus on the historical development of TFA and trace the TFA *Bharata Natyam* training syllables leading to *arangetram*.

University of Malaya

## CHAPTER 2

### DEVELOPMENT OF TEMPLE OF FINE ARTS FROM 1981

#### 2.1. Development of TFA From 1981

TFA Kuala Lumpur was founded by Swami Shantanand Saraswathi, an Indian monk, whose divine destiny brought him to Malaysian soil, landing in Kuala Lumpur in 1971 (Shanmuganayagam, 2005, p. 2). In 1981, Swami Shantanand Saraswati, sensing a “cultural vacuum among the young people”, was inspired to start an arts institution for children (Jit, 1988: 64). The founder, driven by a “love for the cause of fine arts” (Nadarajah M 2004:6), founded TFA Kuala Lumpur and TFA cultural centres were formed in Penang, Johor Bahru, and Malacca, Malaysia; Singapore; Colombo, Sri Lanka; Perth, Australia; Coimbatore and Chennai, India; and New Zealand (2016).

Although TFA offers other genres of Indian classical dance forms, my study focuses on *Bharata Natyam* taught at TFA Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which represents the international headquarters for the organisation. This study explores the procedure and strategy engaged in the teaching and learning structure that is imparted to the students at TFA Kuala Lumpur, as this dance form was the only genre taught in the first decade of its inception. The procedure and strategy involves the *Bharata Natyam* syllables structured into examinable modules that I will detail in this chapter. The modules lead to the *arangetram* levels and this study thus examines the continuity of the training and performance in the arts after graduating in *arangetram*. The study seeks to link the findings to reiterate TFA as an organisation with a different tapestry creating cultural continuity for the Indian community.

It is important at this juncture to mention that the pioneer dance masters of TFA, V.K. Sivadas and Gopal Shetty, were notable male Indian dancers in the 1950s and 1960s who not only performed Indian classical dance in Malaysia but were also pioneers who taught it. “Among the first people to teach *Bharata Natyam* in pre-



independent Malaya was Sivadas, who founded his dance school the Sivadas-Vatsala Dance Troupe in 1953. In 1954, Shetty started dance classes at the Sangeetha Abhivirthi Sabha Association in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur” (Gulam, 2004, p. 51). Today, their students span three generations.

Swami Shantanand Saraswati brought together these two “established gurus of the Indian dance community, each who at that time had their own students” under one roof. Swamiji’s “wisdom and guidance won them over, clearly spreading the philosophy that there is unity in strength” (Gonzales, 2013, pp. 32–33). This unity of the historical dance masters helped to pool their expertise to lay the foundation of TFA’s *Bharata Natyam* classes.

Master Sivadas and Master Gopal Shetty pooled in their talents to train students in the beginning stages of TFA’s inception. Both masters had *Bharata Natyam* and *Kathakali* training and Master Gopal had an additional training in *Manipuri* (Jit, 1988, p. 47).

Gopal’s teacher K.K. Shetty was a student of Uday Shankar. Gopal’s choreography had the influence of Uday Shankar’s style. Sivadas studied dance under Natuvanar Palanisami Pillai of the Rabrindranath Tagore Academy and Guru Gopinath of Madras, which primed him to begin his arduous journey into the arts of *Bharata Natyam* and *Kathakali*.

Post-independence Malaysia witnessed perhaps the earliest large-scale dissemination of Indian audiences. Sivadas and Gopal were at the forefront of this historic movement. Wherever Indian classical dance gained wide attention, be it at state banquets or in the annual pestas (carnivals) in the Lake Gardens, the presence of either Sivadas or Gopal on stage was ubiquitous (Jit, 1988, pp. 32–33).

As TFA's directors, Sivadas and Shetty complemented each other, accounting for their enormously successful collaboration as teachers and choreographers. Both the dance masters worked with such togetherness that "such artistic fellowship is unusual in the world of art particularly in dance" (Jit, 1988, p. 33). Thiagarajan (2012) credits the two dance masters as "artistically creative in producing hybrid works, blending different ethnic dances" and "were constantly invited to perform in the state sponsored programs, to choreograph dances for the Ministry of Culture and the National Cultural Complex (KBN)" (p. 71).

Perhaps this diversity could be the reason for TFA's success in the early days. From TFA's inception in 1981, the performance strategy was "anchored upon ensemble dancing", which gives opportunities to both the talented and weaker students.

It is interesting to find that the beginnings of TFA's dance section catered for *Bharata Natyam* only. Under this banner, students learn *Bharata Natyam* as the main subject. The learning of other genre *adavus* or steps in *Kathak*, *Kathakali*, *Manipuri* and folk was done when a dance sequence in a TFA production necessitated its inclusion. Both the dance masters lived a normal family life and projected as exemplary male dancers in TFA.

## **2.2. Suryakala and TFA**

Suryakala,<sup>6</sup> a direct disciple of dance maestro Sri K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai,<sup>7</sup> was invited to TFA to collate the *Bharata Natyam* dance *adavus* or basic dance steps. The majority of TFA teachers were of South Indian descent, Tamilians, Malayalees, Ceylonese, and Brahmins. All had *Bharata Natyam* as their forte and therefore it was natural that *Bharata Natyam* became the main subject taught in the early days. I was one of the teachers trained under the codified *Bharata Natyam* syllabus from Suryakala.

Suryakala (Refer to Appendix A) not only shared her knowledge but voluntarily sang numerous *Bharata Natyam* repertoire recordings of her master's compositions which till today are being used as the main source of reference in TFA classes. Suryakala is both talented in singing and playing the *nattuvangam* (the art of playing the rhythm of dance steps using a pair of cymbals). Gradually, the dance syllabus was split into basic, beginner and intermediate components where dance students were assessed and examined. Starting with practical assessment, the theory and viva components of *Bharata Natyam* were added to the exam modules towards the development of holistic dancers. Suryakala conducted the early TFA *arangetrams* by choreographing, live singing and conducting the *nattuvangam*.

The early TFA performances in the 1980s, under Masters Sivadas and Gopal Shetty, did not confine themselves to only *Bharata Natyam* repertoires. TFA incorporated a broad array of dance productions from Indian, Malay, Chinese and Shakespearean stories. Dance dramas such as *Mahsuri*, *Lady White Snake*, *Butterfly Lovers*, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *Ramayana an Asian Confluence* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* were some of the early productions. Was this an intelligent foresight by TFA's founder to map the institute against the multicultural setting of Malaysia? The first three years of dance productions were free for the public. Auditoriums were packed full. There were accolades from the public. Was this a clever marketing strategy? Many from the audience became TFA's well-wishers and contributed generously towards the expenses of the early productions.

### **2.3. TFA Training Syllabus**

As mentioned earlier, Suryakala helped to collate the *adavu* system for TFA since its inception in 1981. Suryakala taught the *adavus* as she had learnt them from her dance master Dhandayuthapani Pillai. Twelve families of *adavus* were codified as shown below:

**Table 2**  
**TFA's *Adavu* Syllabus**

<b>Name of <i>Adavu</i></b>	<b>Sollukattu (syllables)</b>	<b>Number of steps</b>
Tattadavu	Tai ya tai,tai ya tai	8
Naatadavu	Teiyum thatha teiyum ta	8
Tatti Naatadavu	Teiya teiyi	8
Meetadavu	Tha tei tei tha, dhit tei tei tha	8
Tatti mettadavu (also known as Pancha nadai)	Thaka dhimmi Thakita Thakadhimi thakita Thakka thakita Thakka dhimmi thaka thakita	5
Kudittu mettadavu	Theiha theihi	8
Tatti kuditu mettadavu	Tha thei thei tha	8
Paayudhal adavu	Dhalaangu thom	8
Tat thei tham adavu	That tei tham, dhit thei tham	8
Sarukkal adavu	Dhittheindha thattha	2
Mandi adavu	Thangkida thathat dhinna	2
Teermaanam (2 variations)	Tha hatha jhem thari tha, jhem thari thakka thari thei,tharikittathom... Kitathakka thari kittathom	2 sets

*Note.* TFA has a standardised *adavu* syllabus

All students who register for *Bharata Natyam* at TFA are oriented in the training modules from the onset. Parents too are oriented to enable them to understand the training modules, duration and exams associated with the teaching of *Bharata Natyam*. Orientation is done through PowerPoint presentation and demonstration by senior students. Just as how Rukmini Arundale “introduced the idea of a dedicated dance school where students learned in formal dance classes” (O’Shea, 2009, p. 41), TFA founder Swami Shantanand Saraswati must have had the same vision but with a philosophy that envisioned a concept of volunteerism where everyone served the community. Rukmini Arundale’s Kalakshetra introduced formal dance classes on a full-time basis, whereas TFA offered classes part-time. Over the years, TFA standardised the teaching framework of *Bharata Natyam*, providing a syllabus with grades and exams. TFA’s founder mooted this standardisation for students to learn the art form in a qualitative way to pave the way for students to become consummate performers and conscientious human beings.

The *Bharata Natyam* syllabus at TFA is organised in stages from one to six. Each stage or level is incorporated with specific learning modules from basic *adavus* or steps to the different items in a *Bharata Natyam* repertoire. These levels are spread out over seven to ten years, incorporating theory and viva components. All students are required to sit for an exam at each stage. At each level of success, a transcript is given, which is an official typewritten record of the student’s progress and grades achieved. The transcript conveys to both the students and parents the strengths and areas to focus on for further improvements. The students that complete the dance module of Stage 6 are considered to have qualified for the *arangetram*, whereupon a certificate is awarded to the students, recognising them as TFA graduates. Initiated by Swami Shantanand Saraswati, the certificate carries the title of “Nriyjanjali”. At TFA, the student who finishes the Stage 6 module is considered as having completed the stipulated *Bharata*

*Natyam* course and qualifies to present the *arangetram*. Presenting one is optional for the student. For those who have opted in, a certificate of merit is presented that carries the title “Yogyata Patra”.

The primary aim of this research is to study the training of *Bharata Natyam* at TFA and its connectivity in creating continuity for dancers who complete their *arangetram* and view how the *guru-sishya* component, an integral feature in the learning of the Indian art form, has taken shape. “In India, Gurus or Acharyas are always looked upon as scholars and respected as being equal to Gods and parents, since they impart knowledge and teach wisdom to the disciple. The *Guru Shishya Parampara* has come a long way since the ancient days. The *Gurukulam* or the *ashrams* have now become reputed institutions in various parts of India where the *Gurus* impart training to the students who come to them from various parts of the world (Vaidyanathan, 2004, p. 137). The ancient *Gurukula* system where a student stays with the guru and does service to the guru, has transformed. Institutions have replaced the ancient system. TFA as an institute has over the years blended the ancient system and adapted to the present time.

The study will focus firstly on the *Bharata Natyam* training, which is exam orientated. Secondly, it will focus on how the training and performance in the arts is set into an organisation that is operated on concepts that have been imbibed by its founder to serve the community. According to Turner (1992), spontaneous communitas takes place when a group feels or relates to each other. Spontaneous communitas eliminates status, at least temporarily if not permanently. It is a non-permanent, powerful form of personal interaction among compatible people who obtain a flash of simple, mutual understanding on the existential level (Turner, 1992, p. 48). Schechner (2002) points out that spontaneous communitas is generated by the ritual process. Those in the ritual are all “treated equally”, reinforcing a sense of togetherness (Schechner, 2002, p. 71).

This sense of togetherness that emanates from the students' and parents' involvement in the arts is an integral feature towards the sustenance and continuous learning in *Bharata Natyam* training at TFA.

#### **2.4. TFA's Inception**

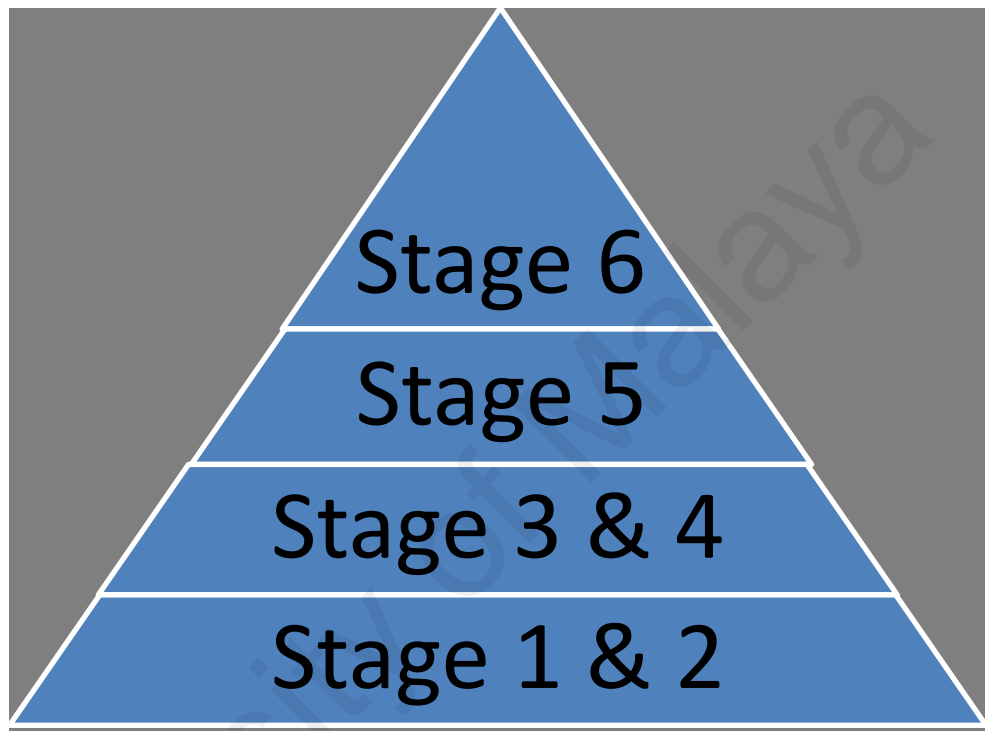
At TFA's inception in 1981, the institute began with five Bharata Natyam teachers and forty-five students. In 1988, TFA grew with sixteen teachers guiding over nine hundred students of varying ages (Jit, 1988, p. 33). The teachers served voluntarily, accepting just a monthly allowance. There were trying periods when the organisation could not even pay the allowance to the teachers. Still teaching continued without interruption.

TFA Kuala Lumpur presently has fifty-four teachers for different genres with an average student population of 1800, out of which over 600 are *Bharata Natyam* students (data obtained from the TFA administration office in January 2016). This is a considerably large figure compared to the other dance schools in Kuala Lumpur. It is a community that socially comes together in the artistic pursuit of *Bharata Natyam* by way of learning, teaching and giving support to one another in all related activities. A community that comes from different Indian ethnic backgrounds but with the same agenda. Chatting with some of the parents whose children attend the beginner class of Stage 1 and 2, many look forward to the classes as they feel the children learn discipline. Inquiring further, that discipline refers to the getting ready of their children in their uniforms, putting on the bhindi (the coloured dot sticker that is put on the forehead), the prayer and *namaskaram*<sup>8</sup> to their teacher and more. The parents themselves come with their laptops to do their office work whilst waiting for their children to finish their classes. Some have made new friendships and exchange many ideas and give support to one another.

The dance student population is large in number at the beginner's level. The numbers decrease as they move up the ladder. The diagram below exhibits almost the same projection in most dance schools.

**Table 2.2**

**The pyramid showing the student population at each level of training at TFA**



Stage 1: *Adavu* Training

Stage 2: *Adavu* Training

Stage 3: Bharata Natyam Repertoire (Alarippu, Jathiswaram & Sabdam)

Stage 4: *Bharata Natyam* Repertoire (Varnam)

Stage 5: *Bharata Natyam* Repertoire (Padams & Thillana)

Stage 6: Presentation of the whole repertoire (Stage 3 to 5) to qualify for

*arangetram* (solo dance debut)



Malar Gunaratnam says that the assessment and exam system helps to keep a high level of quality in the teaching and performance of *Bharata Natyam*. They also ensure that the dance students who work towards their *arangetram* have the mental strength to work hard physically. She also says that each stage of the dance syllabus puts forth different challenges to prepare the dance student physically and emotionally.

At each level, the students learn different contents from the structured modules. The students attain a sense of achievement and accomplishment passing through the levels, transiting to higher levels of learning. Each level is a passage of achievement with new knowledge and bodily experiences. From my observation, each level transits a student from one stage of knowledge to a higher stage of dance experiences. The exam acts as a positive verification and initiation for the dance student to move on to a higher level. Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* stresses how "during initiations, persons leave their ordinary lives behind (separation), undergo ordeals by means of which old behaviours are erased and new behaviours and knowledge learned (liminal phase), and emerge with a new identity and at a new level of responsibility (reintegration)" (Schechner, 2006, p. 236).

Though the pyramid exhibits smaller numbers at the higher levels, the volume of students is large at stages one and two. The volume of students thus is large at all levels.

TFA Kuala Lumpur presently has fifty-four teachers with an average student population of 1,800, out of which over 600 are *Bharata Natyam* students (data obtained from the TFA administration office, January 2016). This is a considerably large figure compared to the other dance schools in Kuala Lumpur.

## **2.5. Beginners Stage One and Two**

The beginner's stage sets the foundation for pre-*arangetram* preparation. Students from the age of six can be registered for *Bharata Natyam* classes at TFA.

The volume of students registering for Stage one *Bharata Natyam* classes is high. The flow continues on to Stage two. These two stages are crucial in embedding the foundation towards proper execution of the basic dance steps or *adavus*. The formulation and beginning of the *Bharata Natyam* practical exams started in the early 1990s. The dance syllabus was structured into smaller components to enable the students to learn the necessary technique and dance grammar qualitatively. All exams were conducted in a summative or final way. In 1995, the formative assessments were introduced prior to the final exam. Finding that the final exams were not producing the desired results, periodical assessments were introduced to help fine-tune the desired clarity in dance movements and rhythm—*angga shuddam* and *taala shuddam*. The formative assessments were a diagnostic tool to recommend to the students the weak areas to work towards betterment. Areas such as rhythm, hand gestures, proper body alignment, facial expression and presentation are designed in the assessment form. The class teacher analyses the assessment and works with the respective student to strengthen weak areas.

At each stage, assessments at formative levels and a final exam at the summative level were conducted to ensure that students learn to remember and present their *adavus* or basic steps constructively.

Patience and perseverance are required in these early stages to ensure that the students gain the *adavu* movements in sequence and also the different names and *solkattu*.<sup>9</sup> The total *adavu* syllabus is divided into two stages. Each stage comprises of six families of *adavus* with a total of forty-five basic steps in Stage 1 and about thirty-eight basic steps in Stage 2 (refer to Table 2.1). The learning of these basic steps takes two and half to three years.

Rukmini Arundale<sup>10</sup> mentions that “in *Bharata Natyam* it took no less than seven or eight years of hard work. Today even twelve months is too long”(Soneji, 2010, pp. 195–196). This statement reflects parents’ impatience with the time factor of training.

Reflecting on parent’s impatience, I met a parent of a ten-year old-girl who was learning *Bharata Natyam* from another school. This parent came to me to conduct the *arangetram* for her child so that her child could then concentrate on her studies. I refused on the grounds that a hurried performance of an *arangetram* would lose out on the quality and learning process. The mother was adamant and at last she made an arrangement with a school in Chennai, India, which gave her a package deal to conduct the *arangetram* within a three-month period. This rushed performance, demonstrates a lack of understanding of the actual training process of an *arangetram* and appreciation of nurturing *Bharata Natyam* as a traditional art form. Legendary dancer T. Balasaraswati<sup>11</sup> mentions, “One has to begin early and learn it for many years to reach a devout understanding of the immanent greatness of this art (Soneji, 2010, p. 202). Today, it is vital to emphasise to dancers that one can gain maturity in this dance form only through complete dedication, hard work and passion.

## **2.6. Intermediate Stage Three**

This stage (Stage three) introduces the students to the first three items in a *Bharata Natyam* repertoire, namely *Alarippu*,<sup>12</sup> *Jathiswaram*<sup>13</sup> and *Shabdham*.<sup>14</sup> The first two items are purely an exhibit of a combination of the basic steps. The third dance piece, *Shabdham*, is where the dance student is first introduced to expression or *abhinaya*. At TFA, the training period of this stage takes between two to three years. The students are first assessed in the *Alarippu* and *Jathiswaram*, which showcase the technique of *adavus* and then in the *Shabdham*, which tests the understanding of *abhinaya* or expression. At the assessment exam, students are tested over a thirty-mark

percentage. The assessment helps examiners to point out to the students the areas to improve on before the final exam. The remaining seventy percent is tested at the final exam. Shankar Kandasamy, who is the main examiner, says that this process instils a sense of quality dancing and students learn to practice and train regularly.

## **2.7. Advance Stage Four and Five**

Progressing into the senior stages (Stages four & five) becomes very challenging, as the students start learning the *Varnam*<sup>15</sup> item, which requires more focus, discipline and stamina. A *Varnam* piece can stretch from twenty-five minutes to more than an hour, depending on the choreographer and the versatility of the dancer. T. Balasaraswati mentions, “If *Bharata Natyam* is studied with devotion; dedication; patience and thoroughness, its completeness in its traditional form will be crystal clear” (Soneji, 2010, p. 201). At Stage five, the student learns three padams or devotional songs expressing *shringara rasa*<sup>16</sup> and the *nritta*<sup>17</sup> item *thillana*. *Shringara padams* contain *nayaka-nayika* (hero and heroine) themes with references to the love episodes of the patron king or love of a devotee to the Lord (Rao, 1980, p. 44). The *thillana* is a musical composition used profusely in *Bharata Natyam*. At the end of the composition, there is usually a short lyric in praise of a king or god. This item is generally performed towards the end of a recital (Rao, 1980, p. 62).

## **2.8. Margam Stage (Stage six)**

In 2000, revamping of the dance levels or stages was initiated. The dance components were increased from five stages to six stages, where the sixth stage was the *margam* stage or the stage where the student presents the *Bharata Natyam* repertoire of six pieces, exhibiting the students’ ability in memorising the dance pieces, in having the stamina to perform and execute the dances with confidence.

Arriving at Stage six signifies the students' growth in maturity, learning to take on the pressure of practice and self-discipline to prepare and present all the items from Stage three to five in order to qualify for an *arangetram*. Though there are a total of eight items from Stage three to five, at TFA exam level only six items are chosen for students to present. Earlier, the students presented the *margam* only in front of several examiners. Teachers from other dance schools are invited to sit in as examiners. From 2015 onwards, the *margam* had been re-designed as a performance. The students dress up in costumes and make up to perform their *margam*. The students' dance teachers, parents, family members and peer-group friends are invited to witness this performance. The idea was to give a sense of support and perk up the performance quality by the dance students and not feel stressed with fear of presentation.

## **2.9. Guru-Sishya Tradition**

Since ancient times, a teacher has been accepted as the guru—a mentor, preceptor and spiritual guide. It is widely accepted that without a guru there can be no understanding or knowledge. One needs a teacher not only to learn the basics in life, but also to be shown direction in life, and to bring about spiritual initiation.

Chatterjea (1996) had examined the *guru-sishya* system, which was predicated on the student's unconditional surrender to the guru's training process. Her essay begins by taking a close look at this system of training, both at its inception and as it exists today, and analyses its typical characteristics as well as some of the distinguishing features of Indian dance training (Chatterjea, 1996, p. 68). The tradition of the *guru-sishya* system in Indian classical training in the contemporary environment has declined today.

Chatterjea (1996) is of the opinion that the *guru-sishya* system “seems to have become increasingly anomalous in the contemporary socioeconomic and political

situation and tainted with corrupted practices where talent takes a back seat to financial gains. This then weakens the genuine emotive quality and hinders the training process” (p. 87). Even so, there is still an inherent quality in this tradition that makes it so “effective” that Chatterjea (1996) mentions is “missing from other contemporary learning modes” (p. 89).

Rao (1996) too mentions that “training in the arts has retained the element of respect for the guru and devotion of the *sisya* unlike the contemporary education that fosters an informal relationship between the teacher and student” (Rao, 1996, p.70). In TFA, the teachers foster a friendly relationship with the students

At the age of ten, having learnt under two other dance teachers, I came under the tutelage of K.P. Baskar and his wife Santha Baskar of the then Baskar’s Academy of Dance. I looked forward to classes under “Aunty” Santha, as I used to address her and still do. The guru concept dawned in me very much later. The bonding with my dance teacher was friendly, caring and motivating. The teacher-student relationship was special for me, as I felt a great sense of respect and love. Learning the different *Bharata Natyam* items was such a joy for me and my friends. Over time, this relationship blossomed. *Namaskaram* (touching the feet of the guru for blessings) to my guru became heartfelt. There transpired a bonding of mutual love, honesty and sharing. The *guru-sishya* tradition is modified and the bonding is close.

The *namaskaram* to the dance teachers at TFA and several other dance schools in Kuala Lumpur is the standard ritualistic practice. The recitation of the *sloka* helps inculcate the spiritual values of the respect for the art and the *guru*.

Angikam Bhuvanam Yasya Vachikam Sarva Vangmayam

Aahaaryam Chandra Taraadhi Tam Numas Saatvikam Shivam

The above is a *sloka*, a Sanskrit verse, recited by all *Bharata Natyam* dancers as a prayer at the beginning and end of any dance practice or performance. “A verse recited that is symbolised in the form of art or dance to which Shiva or truth is a symbolic figure” (Danajayan, 2004, p. 6). This *sloka* is taught to the students at the very first dance class. Kandasamy says that he has observed that the *sloka* recitation over the years invokes a spiritual seriousness in students to delve into training and nurture a mutual respect for the teachers.

Chatterjea (1996) mentions that “a *sishya* even today would never think of beginning or ending class without touching the guru’s feet to signify great respect, dance students in the university or in the dance schools do not necessarily go through this ritual” (Chatterjea, 1996, p. 84). The system seems to have become increasingly anomalous in the contemporary socioeconomic and political situation. With some misusing of this system for monetary gains, the *guru-sishya* relationship becomes economically defined, which has diminished the emotive quality, which in turn affects the learning process (Chatterjea, 1996, pp. 67–87).

At TFA, the learning system adheres to a modified form of *guru-sishya* tradition. The students are with the same teacher from the beginner’s stage till the senior stage and Kandasamy, as head of the dance department, assists the teachers in setting the arena for the *arangetram* and helps prepare the students for more challenging items in the *arangetram*.

Kandasamy says that “in no way does a *guru-sishya* relationship transcend it, because of an exam system. The exam system is just a system of a progressive path and at different levels of learning as a cut-off point and as a target to achieve certain skills in a progressive manner. The loyalty to the guru or *vishvaasam* or *guru bhakti*, the personalised relationship to the *guru-sishya* which is very traditional and core to the *Bharata Natyam* and very much integral to the learning and is not diluted in any way at TFA” (S. Kandasamy, personal communication, November 7, 2017). Hema, a senior student at TFA, said, “As much as we respect our teachers, the bonding is friendlier now that I can take a selfie with my teacher.” The relationship between a teacher and student has taken another direction today.

#### **2.10. Qualifying for *Arangetram***

As stipulated by the TFA exam system, once a student has presented his or her Stage 6 dance *margam* repertoire and passes with marks of 70% and above, he or she qualifies for an *arangetram*. It falls now on the student together with his or her parents to decide whether to embark on the *arangetram* journey.

#### **2.11. Pre-*Arangetram* process**

A discussion by the dance director is held to orientate both the student and parents of all the preparations needed towards staging the *arangetram*. The concerned areas are typed up as a checklist for the parents to attend to. The main concern is funding. Parents need to fork out between 20,000–25,000 ringgit. The main proportion of expenses comprise of the rental of auditorium, *arangetram* training fee, engagement of musicians for live orchestration, food and accommodation, printing of invitation cards, costumes and jewellery and such.

As for the student, it is a spiritual journey. Kandasamy, the main person who choreographs and trains students for *arangetram*, says, “TFA’s *arangetram* is running



on a professional level. This can be attributed to the exam system that extracts the quality. Students actually taste and experience a wow factor”. Unlike many other dance schools, the dance teacher is the sole decision maker. How does one know the cut-off point to know if the student is ready for an *arangetram*? Kandasamy explained that with the exam system all students get an equal opportunity to showcase their ability to qualify for *arangetram*.

## 2.12. The Mandala Puja

Students rehearsing for their *arangetram* were encouraged to do the *Natarajah Pooja*, where the students do *abhishekam*<sup>18</sup> to the Natarajah idol. According to Shankar Kandasamy, there was a group of Shiva Family devotees (on the advice of The Founder) who came to do early morning prayers for forty-eight days in preparation for the trip to Kashi in 2003. Apparently at the same time, there was a group of fourteen *arangetram* students who joined the prayer group and what started as an informal way of worship became a practice and till today it has come to be observed by all students preparing for their *arangetram*. The founder, noticing the students performing the Nataraja idol *abhishekam*, was impressed and commented that this practice should be done by all students preparing for their *arangetram*. This was to instil a self-discipline and invoke an inner positive drive to prepare for their *arangetram*.

Once a student qualifies and decides to present his or her *arangetram*, a mandala pooja is observed for forty-eight days. This is a religious austerity observed and performed by the students preparing for their *arangetram* at TFA. It comprises of the students preparing for *arangetram* to do *abhishekam*<sup>1919</sup> on the idol of Nataraja.

A mandala is defined as a period of time (41 days) that allows the fruits of tapas—intense sadhana—performed in that time to manifest. Some observe 41–48 days.

## **2.13. Pre-Arangetram Experiences**

In order to understand the pre-*arangetram* experiences, I interviewed twenty students who shared their journey. I put forth six students' journey to share their views generally. All of whom I interviewed shared similar experiences but I chose to highlight six of them to put forth important perspectives that aided the teachers, parents and the dancers to show more concern in the pre-*arangetram* training.

### **2.13.1. Case 1: Swathi Sivadas**

Swathi Sivadas started her *Bharata Natyam* classes in 1997 when she was six years old, under Madhavan Velayutham. When she came to Stage 3 she came under the guidance of J.T. Choong. After this she came under the guidance of Latha Nair and completed her *arangetram* in August 2007. Swathi is a music graduate from UCSI Kuala Lumpur. Swathi's mother is a teacher at TFA, teaching piano.

### **2.13.2. Training and Injuries**

The training period for an *arangetram* is an extreme and concentrated period especially during the month before the performance. Swathi mentioned that the training hours were long and exhaustive.

In Swathi's experience, the pre-*arangetram* practice was intense and she did not get enough rest. She was at school and balancing both school and pre-*arangetram* training, which was extreme. The intensity, comprised of the daily *mandala puja* forty-eight days before the *arangetram* early morning at six, took a toll on her. Soon after the prayers, it is a light breakfast with a short rest and a total workout of the *adavus*. The repertoire training continued till lunch time and practice started in the evening till night. The training for Swathi was intense in the month before her *arangetram*.

Sustaining injuries during this period of training by the dancers, such as an ankle sprain, skin abrasion under the feet, were quite common. The warm-up and *adavu*

training every morning was introduced by TFA teachers and Shankar Kandasamy to bring down the risk of injuries. Swathi sustained pain in her left feet a day before her *arangetram* and this was of great concern to her teachers and parents. The long hours of practice too were cut down to allow the dancers to retire and rest and come back refreshed for practice the next morning.

Revathi M. Murugappan (2012), in her study of Training Methods and Injury of female pre-professional dancers in Ballet and *Bharata Natyam*, stresses that “body conditioning methods need to be a more effective training and injury prevention methods to create a technically brilliant, aesthetically beautiful, well-educated dancer. Her study affirms her hypothesis “that training methods among ballet and *Bharata Natyam* pre-professional dancers are indeed inadequate and lead to injuries in both genres” (Murugappan 2012, p, 102). This study and information is vital to educate all dancers on the importance of body conditioning methods to lower the risk of injuries.

TFA teachers in recent years have stressed and emphasised on proper warm-up exercises in all class, especially the *margam* and *arangetram* practice classes, as these levels are physically demanding. The *margam* level, as explained earlier, comprises of the students presenting seven *Bharata Natyam* repertoires to be graded. Each dance piece has to be memorised and presented in a continuous manner that takes about two hours. The dancer needs to be physically strong with stamina, which comes with rigorous practice.

#### **2.14. Case 2: Hemavathi Sivanesan**

Hemavathi is the daughter of Vasugi Sivanesan, who is a senior dance teacher at TFA. Hemavathy presented her *arangetram* on 7 September 2007 at Auditorium Muzium Negara. She spoke very passionately of her *arangetram* journey. Hema is a dance graduate from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Hema started

her *Bharata Natyam* training at age six under Shankar Kandasamy and then came under the guidance of her mother. Her mother Vasugi performed in many TFA productions and Hema was exposed to the arts scene at an early age. Dance has been integral in her growth in the last twenty-five years.

#### **2.14.1. Transformation**

As much as Hema feels that TFA's pre-*arangetram* mode of training and syllabus are good as Hema iterates that the structured *Bharata Natyam* modules into stages has mapped the gradual, qualitative progress of the technique and performance by the students; Hema feels that the process needs to be re-thought of in terms of the mental and emotional wellbeing of the students that plays a huge part in the continuous interest in the arts. This needs to be cultivated from a young age so that as an adult the desire to come back and to be part of the art scene and perhaps think of it as a career can be achieved.

Hema also wonders if a step back needs to be taken to view the evolution of the society around in terms of their increased expectations. This to me, as a *Bharata Natyam* dance teacher, seems a worthwhile thought that Hema has put forward where the present structure is revisited to see if the current structure facilitates the growth towards a more continuous involvement by the students in the arts. Being exposed to dance from a very young age, Hema wonders if other elements like drama and exploration classes could be incorporated in the existing syllabus to enhance the dance development in a more holistic way, especially in the higher levels.

The sharing of innovative ideas from the senior and serious dancers can act as a contributing factor towards more productive output. TFA can certainly benefit by being interactive with the seniors who can share innovative ideas towards TFA's transformation. Hema being a pro-active person, sharing the same pre-*arangetram*

training as her friends, gave thought towards a more progressive output of the early training and pre-*arangetram* training.

### **2.15. Case 3: Purnima Segaran**

Purnima started dance classes when she was seven years and is almost sixteen now. She has a degree in finance from Multimedia University. Purnima says that dance movements did not come easily to her and she needed to practice more to master the movements physically.

#### **2.15.1. Importance of peer group support**

Purnima did her *arangetram* in 2009 right after her form five exam in 2008. She was encouraged by her teacher to prepare for her *margam* exam and thought she was embedded to a possible presentation of her *arangetram*. Her parents were also notified. For Purnima's parents, they left the decision to their daughter. Purnima first had mixed feelings, as she was not sure if she was ready to meet the demands of the *arangetram* training especially since it was a solo presentation. Purnima has stage fright when performing and the thought of performing solo evoked anxiety. Her teacher advised her to complete her *margam* exam that was a requirement to proceed to an *arangetram*. Purnima felt that having a group of friends to rehearse and prepare for the *margam* exam was a blessing. It was the great support from her peer group that made the pre-*arangetram* journey a pleasant one. Since Purnima embarked on her *arangetram* immediately after her *margam* exam, she felt that she was physically prepared.

I had the opportunity to sit in during a few pre-*arangetram* practices and have observed the interaction of peer-group integration. When my students from Johor Bahru and my two boys underwent pre-*arangetram* training, I witnessed strong peer-group support. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, TFA conducts an average of four to five

*arangetrams* a year. These dancers are pooled together to practice as a team and this is favourable to the team spirit.

The dancers share some of the same repertoire and the emotional support that the dancers give each other is remarkable, as each help one another to boost morale and encourage rehearsing their repertoire with utmost persistence and giving their best.

#### **2.16. Case 4: Umesh Shankar Aiyar**

Umesh Shankar just completed his medical degree from Manipal Medical College, Malacca. He is now practicing his housemanship at the general hospital in Johor Bahru. Umesh's involvement in dance happened by chance.

##### **2.16.1. Parental support**

Umesh initially enrolled in Carnatic vocals at TFA. Whilst waiting to be picked up by his mother, Umesh used to sit and watch the dance classes. He grew to like it and attributes the interest to being cultivated by his mother, who used to bring him to watch dance programmes. With his mother's support, Umesh Shankar enrolled for dance classes. He was motivated to do his *arangetram* since youth after watching a number of solo performances. Umesh Shankar prepared for his *arangetram* in 2010 after his form five exams. Umesh has a powerful memory and tackled his *arangetram* repertoire with ease and hard work. His teacher encouraged him to do jogging to get more fit and to shed a little weight.

His pre-*arangetram* training was similar to the previous students. The daily training started with *adavu* training and *arangetram* repertoire training in the afternoons.

Being a widow, Umesh's mother strongly supported her son's involvement in the arts. Umesh too valued his mother's trust and encouragement and worked hard in both his academic studies and the arts. In fact, all the parents of the *arangetram* students

interviewed exhibited strong support towards their children, as they realised that their children were working very hard physically, mentally and emotionally. The parents were not only supportive to their own children but showed kindness to the students practicing along with them. The parents supported all the dancers with encouraging words and even prepared food to be shared by the dancers in practice. The parental positive support is a vital ingredient for the students pre-*arangetram* training.

### **2.17. Case 5: Hariraam Tingyuan Lam**

Hari is a senior dance student and presently a violin teacher at TFA. He studied Performance Studies (music) at Aswara (Akademi Seni Seni Budaya Dan Warisan Kebangsaan). Hari started his *Bharata Natyam* classes in 1991 under the instruction of Vasugi Sivanesan.

#### **2.17.1. Sacrifices**

Coming from a family involved in the arts, Hari did not have any major issues in his pre-*arangetram* preparations. In fact, it was an exciting journey for him. He did encounter mental and emotional problems especially when one has to dedicate a lot of hours of energy and effort into perfecting the art form to the best of one's capacity. Other than this, Hari did not have any physical issues during his *arangetram* preparation.

Hari embarked on his *Bharata Natyam* solo debut after his form five exam. He decided to dedicate 2009 to just dancing and performing. He did not commit to further education at this point as he wanted to give his undivided attention to his solo debut. This was a choice by Hari to sacrifice his academic studies and put it on a hold to give his full attention towards preparing his *arangetram*. Hari too has presented his violin solo debut. Hari strongly feels that he wants to pursue a career more seriously as a musician than a dancer, as he feels that there is permanency to a career as a musician.

Hari renders as much help in the dance section and shares his dance experiences with fellow dancers. Hari says that the pre-*arangetram* training instilled a sense of self-responsibility and discipline. Whilst the teacher is there to choreograph the *arangetram* repertoire; it is up to the individual student in *arangetram* preparation to ensure that much focus and attention is given to memorising the repertoire with explicit details on body technique and execution.

## **2.18. Case 6: Norbaizura Abdul Ghani**

Norbaizura did her bachelor's in dance at Aswara. Baizura is now doing her masters in Malay Studies at Universiti Malaya. She presently is a lecturer at the dance faculty in Aswara. Baizura was exposed to *Bharata Natyam* at Aswara as an elective subject. Being of Malay ethnicity, she was attracted to *Bharata Natyam* purely for its intricacies and challenges in learning that was made pliable by her teacher Vasugi Sivanesan.

### **2.19.1. Beyond Ethnic and Religious Boundaries**

The Dance Department of Aswara, also known as National Arts Culture and Heritage Academy, Selangor, included the study of *Bharata Natyam* in the syllabus of the core Traditional Dances of Malaysia module in 2005, which resulted in an exceptionally high standard of achievement by outstanding Malay students (Gonzales, 2011, p. 37). Baizura and her colleague Mohd Yunus presented their *Bharata Natyam arangetram*, setting a trend that non-Indians can present a *Bharata Natyam arangetram* comfortably without any cultural inhibitions.

TFA Kuala Lumpur dance teachers have been “entrusted” in the teaching of the *Bharata Natyam* dance syllabus at Aswara using the same training structure applied in TFA. Before 2005, *Bharata Natyam* was only taught as an elective subject for one semester. In March 2011, Baizura and her colleague Mohd Yunus paired to present their



*arangetram*. The former dean of the Dance faculty Dr. Joseph Gonzales describes the *arangetram* Baizura is the first Malay female to perform a *Bharata Natyam arangetram*. Being a Muslim, Baizura took the brave decision to major in *Bharata Natyam* and ventured into wanting to present her *Bharata Natyam arangetram*. Baizura believed that learning any art is beyond race and religion. Baizura was brave and reflective of “a manifestation of pluralist respect and tolerance for others’ religious beliefs and practices” (Gonzales, 2011, p. 204).

## **2.20. Analysis**

My interviewees shared that all had to fully focus on their *arangetram* preparation by separating themselves from their daily routine life. All had to concentrate with discipline and make lots of planning decisions including time-management to be able to rehearse their *arangetram* repertoire. The discipline adhered to were in many areas, such as food, proper warm-up, taking interest in understanding the lyrics of the song selected to enable them to emote appropriately. Each dancer had to ascertain themselves to engage the facets of a dancer’s journey such as inspiration, passion, hard work, flexibility and versatility. All expressed that they had enjoyed the choreographing technique by Shankar and learnt the nuances and importance of selecting the suitable song for the *arangetram* repertoire as well as giving thought to the melody and choreography of adavus.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the actual *arangetram* performance. The pre-*arangetram* analysis brought to the fore some issues that the teachers and TFA management considered and deliberated on to make the pre-*arangetram* more significant to students.

## CHAPTER 3

### TFA ARANGETRAM TRAINING AND PERFORMANCE

#### 3.1. Practice of *Arangetram*

*Bharata Natyam* has evolved over the years with various styles incorporated to enhance its effectiveness. Gaston (1996) in her book *Bharata Natyam from Temple to Theatre* mentions that there are eighteen different *bani*s or styles. Khokar (2016) explains that “*bani* is a style that one learns, adopts and hones through one’s life, so much so that the artist becomes a representative of the style”. For example, the *bani* from the Tanjore royal courts transmitted the *Pandanallur* and *Thanjavur bani*. Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai’s (1910-1945) style is more feminine. Rukmini Arundale propagated the Kalakshetra style of *Bharata Natyam* to attract everyone during the trying period of the abolishment of *devadasi* in 1936. The famous T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984) style is renowned for spontaneous *abhinaya*. The different *bani* has evolved over the years and, as Kandasamy says, each dance teacher imprints his or her style along the way. Kandasamy adds that TFA has a blend of Dandayudhapani Pillai’s and Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai’s *bani* and over the decades has become eclectic by incorporating beautiful features of other styles. TFA’s *arangetram* incorporates styles to enhance the dance choreography

Geetha Sridhar<sup>20</sup> (2010) writes of the burgeoning number of *arangetram* events in the U.K. Having attended many *arangetram* events, Sridhar decided to investigate this intriguing subject more deeply to understand the credibility and the relevance of this practice in today’s world. The writer is of opinion that the South Asian community in the UK views the practice of the “debut performance” as an important event, equivalent to achieving an academic degree at university (Sridhar, 2010). In my observation of *arangetram* performances, it is considered as an important event of achievement by the students.

In the early 1980s, the founder of TFA, Swami Shantanand Saraswathi, entrusted in Suryakala, who hailed from Chennai, the responsibility to set the practical *Bharata Natyam* dance syllabus at the institution. Suryakala was instrumental in choreographing and training the early TFA's *arangetram* preparation assisted by the teachers. Suryakala taught repertoire pieces composed and choreographed by her guru Dandayudhapani Pillai. As shown in Chapter 1, Suryakala taught the *adavu* system as taught by her guru. All *adavus* had eight variations. The repertoire taught by Suryakala: *Allarippu*, *Jathiswaram* in *Nattaikurunji raagam* (melody), *Navaragamalika Varnam*, *Hindolam Thillana* were some of the direct compositions and choreographies learnt from her guru.

Although Kandasamy has retained Suryakala's dance pieces as part as part of the exam modules, he has made artistic changes over the years. He has incorporated new choreographies, with more emphasis on body lines in the execution of *nritta*, pure dance and abstract dance sequences with complicated rhythmic patterns, variety in *adavus* (drawn from different *banis*) and diverse movement vocabularies. This period from 1981-1990 transposes gender dominance of female and male dance instructors at TFA. Whilst Shankar was entrusted to take charge of TFA's *Bharata Natyam* department, the female teachers gave support in the progressive development of the same department. Thiagarajan (2012), who underwent her *arangetram* training at TFA, points out that there were "two forms of training for *arangetram*: the primary training on learning new dances and the other form of training, which I would like to refer as supplementary training" (p. 195). Thiagarajan was primarily trained by Suryakala and overseen by her dance guru Vatsala. Suryakala dedicated her whole life in disseminating her dance knowledge. (A 2014 article in the Hindu papers on Suryakala is attached in Appendix A). The article pays tribute to her life-long dedication to the arts.

I focus on the training period at TFA that has incorporated a holistic approach for the purposes of developing dancers to “develop along the correct lines of character and spiritual development” (Volunteers, 1994, p. 90). This was the founder’s mission where “exposing the younger generation to traditional dance and music forms in their true spiritual context and ultimately making him a true seeker of his own inner beauty and aesthetics” (Chandrasekhar, 2003, p. 1).

This vision, from TFA’s inception in 1981 till 2005, was directly under the supervision of its late founder. According to the founder, he emphasised to the *arangetram* students that performing an *arangetram* is a kindergarten step. There is so much more to learn as an *arangetram* is like a drop in the ocean. Continuous learning was encouraged not only to the students but to the teachers as well (Anand, 2013). The founder’s advice is one of the main reason for the teachers and senior students to initiate the post-*arangetram* training.

Van Gennep coined the concept “rites of passage” and provided a threefold taxonomy of rites (pre-liminal, liminal, post-liminal) which he suggested is not only linked to religious practices but to life-cycles and consequently to society in general. I infer that the *arangetram* journey for a student encompasses a life-changing awareness of emotional strength, team work, responsibility, sharing and caring.

### **3.2. Mass *arangetram* to conventional *arangetram* in TFA in 1991**

TFA founder felt that the original concept of an *arangetram* had deteriorated and wanted to abolish this in TFA (Jit, 1988, p. 76). Swamiji felt that conventional *arangetrams* were becoming expensive and that the emphasis should be on the dancer’s presentation. As a result, in 1991, a mass *arangetram* of thirty-four students was conducted using compact disc and not live music as the norm. Unlike conventional *arangetram*, where one dancer presents the *arangetram* with live orchestra, the mass

*arangetram* was presented where each student presented his/her own solo debut according to a specified date and timing. The date and timing were chosen after discussion with the teachers and parents concerned. To accommodate 34 *arangetrams*, two *arangetrams* were scheduled in a day for two weeks; one in the early afternoon and one in the evening. At the end of this mass *arangetram*, a collective graduation ceremony was held at the Civic Centre, Kuala Lumpur. The thirty-four students were mostly children of Shiva Family members. The members enrolled their children in 1981 on the founding of TFA. Having learnt *Bharata Natyam* for a decade, pioneer teachers Sivadas, Vatsala, Gopal Shetty and Radha discussed staging of *arangetram*. The founder's idea of mass *arangetram* was accepted whole heartedly. However, this mass *arangetram* was one of a kind. It was discontinued because parents wanted their children to perform *arangetrams* in the conventional manner with specially arranged *margam* and with live music ensemble.

Since 1991, TFA has conducted more than a hundred *arangetrams*. At TFA KL, about 124 *arangetrams* have been conducted. Students preparing for *arangetram* from other centres also come to TFA KL to practice their repertoire under the guidance of Shankar Kandasamy since 1995.

Below is TFA's list of *arangetrams* from 1991 to date, accessed from TFA archives. Some archives were lost and as such the information is the closest data that I was able to retrieve.

**Table 3.1**

**Mass *Arangetram* in 1991**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>No of students</b>
Female students	22
Male students	12
TOTAL	34

**Table 3.2****Female Indian students solo *arangetram***

<b>Year</b>	<b>No of students</b>
1992	4
1993	1
1994	1
1995	1
1997	6
2000	3
2001	1
2002	4
2003	4
2004	2
2005	1
2007	7
2008	2
2009	8
2010	1
2011	2
2012	1
2013	3
2014	9
2015	3
2016	4
2017	4
TOTAL	72

**Table 6*****Arangetrams presented in pairs by friends/sisters/sister & brother***

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of students</b>
1997	1 pair of sisters
2004	1 pair of friends
2011	2 pair of sisters
2017	2 pair of a sister & brother
TOTAL	6

*Note.* Generally an *arangetram* is presented as a solo performance. But in some situations, teachers see compatibility in students and siblings who can pair up. This is visually pleasing and the cost of staging the *arangetram* is shared.

**Table 3.4*****Male Indian students solo arangetram***

<b>Year</b>	<b>No of students</b>
1992	1
1997	1
2008	1
2010	2
2013	1
TOTAL	6

**Table 3.5*****Non-Indian arangetrams trained in TFA KL (all Aswara students)***

<b>Year</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>No of students</b>
2011	F	Malay	1
2011	M	Malay	1
2013	M	Malay	1
2013	F	Chinese	1
2017	F	Chinese	1
2017	M	Malay	1
TOTAL			6

My purpose in presenting TFA's *arangetram* table is to show evidence of the number of *arangetrams* presented from 1991. Table 4 shows the mass *arangetram* that was initiated by TFA's founder but did not gain acceptance by the parents. Table 5 specifies the female students solo *arangetram* breakdown and also indicates that yearly there has been *arangetram* training and performance and also that the students wanting to present their *arangetram* is increasing in numbers. The *arangetram* has over the years brought about structured training methods, new choreographies, and selfless support amongst teachers and parents. Table 8 shows the number of non-Indian students who presented their *arangetram*. These students overcame the language barriers and worked diligently.

In order to discover the journey and experiences of an *arangetram* preparation and performance, I interviewed about thirty *arangetram* students. As a sampling, I have chosen five TFA students and one Aswara student of whom I had mentioned of their pre-*arangetram* journey in Chapter 2. Each case had similarities and differences that revealed different perspectives. I will analyse below their *arangetram* journey and put forth their *arangetram* performance.

### **3.3 Selected *Arangetram* Participants**

#### **3.3.1 Swathi Sivadas**

The month just before the *arangetram*, the training was intensive and Swathi sustained an injury, a fracture of the third metatarsal of the left leg. She had the pain a day before the *arangetram*; on the day of the *arangetram*, the pain was severe. Swathi danced her repertoire in pain and says that this was not a pleasant experience, yet with great support from the teachers and friends she managed to pull through. Swathi persevered through pain to present her *arangetram*.



Swathi's father expressed concern to the teachers with regards to the intensity of training and suggested that it was vital for students to have enough rest to recuperate physically. This brought about some changes by the teachers to conclude future *arangetram* training by seven in the evening.

### **3.3.2 Hema Sivanesan**

There is much effort that is put in the preparation of an *arangetram*. Physically, it is very taxing and Hema personally mentions that she is accident-prone and had incurred injuries and had to go for acupuncture every day for three months just to be able to dance. Hema practiced her *varnam* item ten times continuously, which took a toll on her physically and has come to realise that the *arangetram* performance must go together with the *arangetram* journey as there are numerous experiences to treasure.

Hema's conception of wanting to excel in her repertoire made her practice without taking into consideration the harm she was inflicting on her body. It was as if Hema was going through excellence paranoia.

Hema feels that she was very lucky in having so much support from many individuals and her peer-group friends both during her practice sessions and on her *arangetram* day. A whole micro-community came to render help voluntarily.

Hema feels strongly that as much as there is strength in technical training, there also should be opportunities to gain experience in performance presentation where the performance component could be incorporated into the exam syllabus.

### **3.3.3 Purnima Segaran**

Purnima presented her *arangetram* in May 2009, right after her form five exam. Practicing her repertoire for her *arangetram* was a smooth journey as Purnima was physically prepared as she had worked for her *margam* exam just before her *arangetram*. She overcame her fear of performing solo and presented her solo debut

calmly. Support from her friends gave her great emotional strength and stage confidence.

Purnima expressed that movements did not come easily. She had to practice more to get the dance steps right. During her *arangetram* training, Purnima realised that it would be good physical experience to perform more before an *arangetram* for a student to enjoy and use the stage space meaningfully. Purnima strongly feels that stage exposure prior to *arangetram* will bring forth more stage confidence and presentation.

#### **3.3.4 Umesh Shankar Ayar**

Vasugi, Umesh's dance teacher, talks highly of Umesh's dedication and discipline in all the activities he does. This quality was seen in the preparation and presentation of his *arangetram*. I attended his *arangetram* and witnessed Umesh presenting his *arangetram* with confidence. Umesh got his friends to help him in ushering in the guests in the way he had planned. All the guests were received with a *modakam*, a favourite sweet of the Hindu deity Ganesha, as Umesh planned to present his *arangetram* on the day of the Hindu festival *Ganesh Chaturthi*. Umesh's main dance piece, the *Varnam*, was on the elephant God Ganesha.

Umesh took responsibility in planning all the details of his *arangetram*. Amidst his busy schedule of rehearsals, Umesh took charge of designing his invitation and programme brochures, and planning the foyer decorations and such. His friends and relatives provided much help.

#### **3.3.5 Hariraam Tingyaun Lam**

Hari enjoyed his *arangetram* process, which he says was a challenging one in a positive way. He sailed through his *arangetram* with the support of his friends, seven of them who were also in training with Hari preparing for their *arangetram*. Hari says he enjoyed performing his *arangetram*. I attended Hari's *arangetram*. He performed

energetically. He shared that rehearsing with his friends was a strong union that presented positivity in the *arangetram* journey. As much as Hari was nervous on the *arangetram* day, his friends provided much love and emotional support that sailed him through the *arangetram* performance. This peer-group bonding has developed into a stronger union that Hari expresses he values till today.

### 3.3.6 Norbaizura Abdul Ghani

Norbaizura started dancing at the age of eighteen when she joined Aswara as a student. At Aswara, Norbaizura learnt many different types of dance, including Malay, Chinese and Indian traditional dances as well as ballet and contemporary dance. When she had to choose her major for her degree, without hesitation, her choice was *Bharata Natyam*.

Norbaizura paired up with her colleague Mohd Yunus to present their *arangetram* in 2011. Baizura trained intensively for a month supported strongly by her parents, Dean of Aswara dance faculty Joseph Gonzales and her dance teachers from TFA. Baizura took the brave step to present the *Bharata Natyam arangetram* with no inhibitions of being a Muslim. Baizura approached the religious elements in *Bharata Natyam* culturally and with an open mind. Baizura learnt the entire *Bharata Natyam* repertoire as a cultural experience. Malaysia being a multi-cultural society, learning each other's traditions and customs has been a natural component in living in harmony. Learning the art form of another culture is a brave step for Baizura. TFA teachers aided much in organising her costumes and ornaments and spent time to explain the lyrics and the meaningful approach to express them in dance form. Norbaizura handled cultural boundaries excellently.

### 3.9. Process and Significance

*Arangetram* training during Suryakala's time from 1991 was concentrated on learning new choreographies. "Suriakala sang, choreographed, and rendered *nattuvangam* for all *Bharata Natyam* dance recitals at the institution in K.L. until 2003" (Thiagarajan, 2012, p. 198). Kandasamy aided Suryakala in the training together with the students' teacher. When Kandasamy took over the *arangetram* training, he focused on body strengthening and proper execution of the *adavus*.

Kandasamy taught several muscle-toning exercises and focused on the *surya-namskaar* or sun salutation yoga. Besides that, *adavu* training was incorporated into the pre-*arangetram* training.

All my interviewees were involved in the same structure of *arangetram* training. At TFA, as mentioned in Chapter 2, *arangetram* training takes at least two months of daily practice prior to the performance day. All go through the exam modules in the different stages to qualify to present their *arangetram*. The exam modules have been mentioned in Chapter 2. The *margam* training, which is the sixth stage and involves a performance presentation of six dance pieces, aids dance students to be prepared physically to take on the challenge of preparing another repertoire for their *arangetram*.

For Purnima Segaran, her decision to present her *arangetram* soon after her *margam* exam prepared her physically and mentally to assimilate the learning of an *arangetram* repertoire readily. However, there are students who present their *arangetram* one or two years or more after qualifying for their *margam*. When these students return to prepare to present their *arangetram*, the training starts with daily *adavu* training to gain the body strength. This gap takes place due to the students' personal academic undertakings, and parents need of time to save up for the *arangetram* expenses.

TFA teachers do advise the students to present their *arangetram* within a six-month period after qualifying for their *margam* exam, as the teachers feel that the *arangetram* training would set in more fluidly, meaning that the students would be more physically prepared to adapt to the *arangetram* training. However, this does not seem viable for reasons mentioned above such as proceeding to further academic education and funding.

The teachers, mainly Vatsala, Vasugi, Shymala, Latha, together with Shankar discuss at length to choose *arangetram* repertoire pieces to suit the strengths of each student. As there are more students showing interest in presenting their *arangetram*, there is in recent years a group of four to five students preparing for their *arangetram* during the TFA *arangetram* season which usually takes place twice a year, February to March and August to September. As such, the group share their *arangetram* training and also share some similar repertoire pieces that are decided for the *arangetram* performance. This allows the group to rehearse together. Hariraam, who performed his *arangetram* in 2009, states that the peer-group bonding and rehearsing together assisted each of them to emotionally stay strong and give their best to present their *arangetram* performance in a professional capacity. Kandasamy, the main choreographer for *arangetram* repertoire pieces, mentioned that the TFA *arangetram* is projected on a professional level to give the *arangetram* students the solo dance experience that they may not have after their *arangetram*. Kandasamy says that “there is no sabha culture or a performance platform for solo dancing here in Malaysia as compared to Chennai, where there is a niche audience following for solo *katcheri* or performances” (S. Kandasamy, personal communication, April 7, 2016). Kandasamy states that the TFA *arangetram* performance leaves an inspiring memory in the dancers, who continue to return to classes to learn new repertoires, perform in TFA’s dance productions and assist in teaching.

All the interviewees did experience nervousness at the start of their *arangetram* performance, but warmed up after the performance of the second piece. Each said that they enjoyed the stage space and dwelled gracefully into the rest of the repertoire. They felt a freedom of exhibiting their repertoire and attribute their performance to the daily rehearsing that built up the confidence of presenting an almost-flawless performance. The finale piece brought an inner joy that they could not explain. Hema states that it was a humbling yet adrenaline-charged feeling of achievement. When the certificate carrying the title of “Nrtyanjali” was read, all felt a sense of pride in themselves, for their parents who were on stage with them and their guru. The certificate presentation marked a transition into seniority in performance.

I have attended a number of TFA *arangetram* since 1991 and also the *arangetram* of three of my interviewees. As a dance teacher, I watched the *arangetram* of Swathi, Umesh, Hariraam and evaluated their performances from a discerning point of view. I had the opportunity to watch some of their *arangetram* training sessions. The early *arangetram* comparatively had lesser stress on firm body lines. More emphasis on body technique was stressed when Shankar Kandasamy took charge of the *Bharata Natyam* department. Shankar emphasised core principles of *adavus* such as strong *udgatita*, strong *arai mandi*, strong *natyarambam* and such salient features to project the *adavu* movements in a more distilled way. The outcome of *arangetram* lies in the foundation of performing strong *adavus*. As a spectator, I experienced kinaesthetic empathy, feeling the dancers’ movements and emotions.

### **3.5. Summary**

The *arangetram* for a student at TFA is a life transition that transmits cultural values and knowledge. The *arangetram* is a public event bringing family and friends together as a community to render help and to celebrate the *arangetram* and recognise the students’ efforts. Blumenkrantz and Goldstein (2010) discussed the potential value

of adopting a rites-of-passage framework for developing community interventions for youth. Their focus was on the application of rites of passage with youth, the principles can be applied to other key life transitions. I attribute this application to the *arangetram* event that unites the family, friends and peer-group in all support in preparation for the *arangetram*. The rite not only guides the individual's transition to a new status, but, equally important, it creates public events that celebrated the transition (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2010, pp. 1–2). The liminal phase is exhibited and experienced in the *arangetram* repertoire. Each dance piece in an *arangetram* transmits the dancer from one expressive stage to another depending on the lyrics of the dance piece. This is reflected clearly in van Gennep's second phase of liminality, the phase in between two conditions the individual/group departs and the one which they will enter. Van Gennep described rites of passage were community-created and community-directed experiences that transmit cultural values and knowledge to an individual or individuals. The *arangetram* conveys much cultural values and knowledge when the dancers are learning the dance repertoire.

In my next chapter, I will focus on the post-*arangetram* development in TFA and conduct performance analysis of a few selected productions where the involvement of *arangetram* students was made significant

## CHAPTER 4

### THE POST-*ARANGETRAM* DEVELOPMENT IN TFA AND PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

#### 4.1. Post-*Arangetram*

What next after *arangetram*? For many students, an *arangetram* is a gratifying achievement of all the years of learning. As argued by Gaston (1996), an *arangetram* is considered as an end product of learning. On my observation, after the *arangetram*, students usually venture into their higher academic studies, looking for jobs or getting married.

This study explores the training structure of *Bharata Natyam* and how students execute the practical aspects of *Bharata Natyam* at TFA Kuala Lumpur. TFA is an institute that has begun to take initiatives to put forth a platform for post-*arangetram* learning. My interviews with senior dance teachers brought out their concerns that considerable effort goes into the training of students who present their *arangetram*. Senior teacher Vasugi Sivenesan says that it becomes such a waste when the talents are not nurtured further. Nurturing these dancers into post-*arangetram* learning will add to TFA's talent pool (V. Sivenesan, personal communication, July 26, 2016). The study mainly traces the post-*arangetram* students' endeavours and struggles in continuous learning and the organisational support to this group of post-*arangetram* dancers.

Reviewing the existing literature that *arangetrams* are considered a culmination, this study thus explores efforts by TFA to investigate the reasons and how an institute may contribute towards continuous learning after *arangetram*.

After the *arangetram*, TFA students Hema, Swathi, Purnima, Umesh and Hari, whom I have interviewed, expressed that they felt emptiness. All of them missed the daily routine of exercises and learning. One of the dancers, Purnima, said that as much as she enjoyed the *arangetram* journey, she wanted to return to her normal routine. She



had taken a break from further education to prepare for her *arangetram*. After her *arangetram*, she had a rest and went on to apply to do her foundation, which she did in Malacca. She took on to teach one beginners' class every Saturday. Purnima travelled weekly from Malacca to take classes which she is still continuing till today. She is still performing in TFA shows though not as much as she used to before she started working.

After completing their *arangetram*, TFA students are generally engaged to assist senior teachers. Students who can commit to teach are engaged to teach and are given a nominal allowance. Students are also asked to help to train the students training for their *arangetram*. These were the usual post-*arangetram* participations.

The catalyst to post-*arangetram* learning was mooted by seven *arangetram* students who approached Malar Gunaratnam and expressed their interest to learn *nattuvangam*. *Nattuvangam* is a two-piece cymbal used to represent the sound of the dancer's feet. Thus in 2015, 2016 and 2017, TFA took some initiative to organise workshops in *nattuvangam* for the senior dance students and post-*arangetram* students. One Dr. V. Prasanna Kumar from Bangalore, India, was invited to conduct the *nattuvangam* workshop. Shankar Kandasamy has also held basic *nattuvangam* classes to nurture interested young talents. This effort is still in the early stages and Shankar hopes to groom the talents to start performing with him during *arangetrams*.

The post-*arangetram* dancers had also shown interest in performing another repertoire of solo dancing that the dancers say opens them to newer choreography and helps them experience more depth in *abhinaya* or expression. The students who performed another *margam* after their *arangetram*, namely Hema Sivanesan, Dhanya Thurairaja, Harshini Sukumaran, Aditi Manoharan, Nritta Manoharan, have rekindled interest in other *arangetram* dancers. Hema, who performed her *arangetram* in 2008,

explained that she initiated her *margam* repertoire in 2015 to experience the spiritual magic of her solo debut. Hema wanted to revisit the *Bharata Natyam* repertoire to “engage the emotional bonding for dance and the differences in her skill of execution then and now” (H. Sivanesan, personal communication, 2017). Harshini wanted to learn another repertoire to heighten and situate her *abhinaya* to another level.

Post-*arangetram* learning at TFA has begun to pick up momentum after 2015. More post-*arangetram* students are showing keenness towards further learning either in practical performance or theoretical knowledge or both. The main motivation is through the encouragement of the peer group and support of the teachers who go to great lengths to conduct the training sessions.

#### **4.2. Performance Analysis**

I chose three post-*arangetram* performances in an attempt to showcase the training involved and how each participant experienced different perspectives in their post-*arangetram* performance.

Hemavathi Sivanesan presented her *arangetram* in 2007. After her solo debut, Hema was presented by the international acclaimed dancer Mavin Khoo in a post-*arangetram* performance called *Madhurya* in 2008. This was a dance journey exploring the sacred feminine in a journey of love. In 2014, Hema wanted to present another *Bharata Natyam* repertoire which she named *Purva* (Refer to Appendix C). Her poster portrays her intention in her wanting to present a post-*arangetram* performance. Hema explained *Purva* means past. She named it such in search of that spiritual magic that she experienced during her first solo debut in 2008. She wanted to revisit the *Bharata Natyam* repertoire to engage the emotional bonding for dance and the differences in her skill of execution then and now. Hema explained that whilst the *arangetram* training was fully under the supervision of her dance teacher and trainer, *Purva* training was

mostly self-training though the choreography was put together by Shankar Kandasamy. It was a journey of self-exploratory; as she had to manage her time to train daily, and to self-criticise and appreciate her dance movements. Hema had the opportunity to apply innovative movements to her repertoire and expressed that learning and training for a new repertoire allowed her to have better repository. I attended this performance.

The live orchestra comprised of familiar artists and TFA teachers. Shankar Kandasamy, the artistic choreographer, rendering the *nattuvangam* (rhythmic cymbals), Sridhar on the flute, Kanagamani on the violin. I was awestruck with the vocalist, Bhooma, who is a young doctor by profession and nurtured her passion for Carnatic vocals. It was Bhooma's maiden performance for a dance repertoire. The mridangist (south Indian drum player) was Hema's maternal uncle Ramanan, who resides in Singapore and has carved a niche for himself as an affluent mridangam player. I have known Ramanan since my own performance days, when as a young boy he used to play for many of the shows that I used to dance.

The programme started with the usual invocatory piece on Lord Ganesha (the elephant-headed Hindu God who is attributed as the remover of obstacles). This was followed by *Alarippu*, which is the opening item in a traditional *Bharata Natyam* repertoire. Choreographer Shankar Kandasamy announced that this *Alarippu* though set within the traditional framework was an innovative work to tap into Hema's contemporary talent. Hema expressed that she had to do stamina exercises to keep her dance movements versatile as incorporating contemporary dance movements, Hema needed to keep abreast her body and range of movement. I must admit the item blossomed into a well-planned movement that incorporated traditional as well as contemporary elements that blended artistically. Hema's versatility was exhibited in this dance piece. The next item was *Varnam*, which is considered the most intricate dance item that puts the dancer to the test on his or her capabilities and expressive abilities.

Hema's rendition of the thirty-five minute *Varnam* was energised with beautiful statuette movements. Her gesturing of the lyrics, with intense facial expression (*abhinaya*), captivated my attention and was a soul-stirring experience for me. After this item, a short break of ten minutes was announced.

The second half of the programme started with a rendition of three *padams* (dances that exhibits expression to a song). They portrayed three different kinds of *nayika* or heroine. The first showcased a teenage girl who is devoted to Lord Shiva and her infatuation with Him. The second portrayed the *nayika* being jilted by Lord Krishna. This was full of pathos. The third was on the two facets of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvathi. The male and female aspects in dancing, known as *taandava* and *laasya*, were clearly showcased in these *padams*, Hema revealed her versatility and maturity in *Bharata Natyam* that in my opinion was enhanced by her exposure to different genres of dance, namely *Kathak*, *Odissi*, ballet and contemporary. Hema did share that her *Bharata Natyam* training helped her build a strong foundation of meticulous learning and practice. This, Hema says, aided her to independently practice her dance pieces and do self-correction constructively. She did however rely on her friends to observe her practice and give constructive criticism. Hema feels strongly that her participation in shows in the pre-*arangetram* period enriched her stage experiences, especially presentation on stage was a valuable dynamic that she learnt. Exposure to stage performances instils a sense of confidence and training for rehearsals integrates peer-group responsibilities and cooperation. Hema had set the pace for other *arangetram* students to consider presenting another *Bharata Natyam* repertoire.

Kandasamy encouraged Harshini Sukumaran, a young dancer who performed her *arangetram* in 2009, to perform a solo *Bharata Natyam* repertoire in Bangalore at the 2017 VRC Academy Music and Dance Festival. Harshini was able to take up this offer as she was able to commit to practice time as she was running her own designer

company. Harshini said it was a gratifying experience as she was able to get insight into solo performance in a foreign country. Harshini is a passionate dancer and she loves the *abhinaya* aspect of *Bharata Natyam*. In order to explore her *abhinaya* and versatility, she ventured into a post-*arangetram* repertoire called *Punarnava* in November 2017. She said the solo repertoire was to go further in her dancing and experience dancing as a soloist. Harshini said she wanted to test herself to feel the maturity in her dancing from the time of her *arangetram*. During the *arangetram*, Harshini said that it was a raw period where everything was learnt as instructed.

With the performance of *Punarnava*, Harshini said she had a freedom of creativity that she could explore and to an extent a freedom of selecting some of the repertoire pieces. The performance was presented using a CD instead of live orchestra. This was due to funding resources as she had to fund the whole program by herself. The post-*arangetram* performance, in Harshini's words, were "renewing, rejuvenating and reviving". The post-*arangetram* training, said Harshini, instilled a value of self-growth in management of time for practice, peer group support and doing research into the lyrics to be able to engage and invoke the appropriate *abhinaya* or facial expression.

One endeavour by nine post-*arangetram* students was the staging of the 2015 production *Reflection* (Refer to Appendix B). The production was chosen to remember and trace their nostalgic *arangetram* journey. The nine friends, namely Hema Sivanesan, Purnima Segaran, Vishaka Rajasingam, Shonabushani Velusamy, Pankhuri Agrawal, Laveenia Sivalingam, Swathi Sivadas, Harshini Sukumaran and Prem Sagar Krishnan, got together to brainstorm on the repertoire contents and drew up a schedule for two-months practice. This production was solely their own effort in celebrating their decades of friendship. From costumes to selection of repertoire to lighting cues, all was planned and put into perspective by the main team, assisted by friends who could not

participate in the actual dancing but rendered help in stage management, posters and other production elements.

This was a learning process for everyone. Hema, who was the only full-time teacher at TFA in the group at that period, says that more of such productions can pave the way to more serious dancing and learning. All dancers expressed that they experienced a sense of maturity and responsibility during the production. It was transformative to learn how to pool their individual talents together. Shona concluded by saying that “as a person, as an individual, we need to ask if we are seeking and taking the opportunities. We just can’t say I did not get this and that. If you do your part, things will fall into place” (S. Velusamy, personal communication, 2015). Ultimately, passion needs to be self-driven. Shona represents a new generation of dancers who feels that, as dancers, one has to be self-seeking to upgrade oneself.

When I interviewed this group of post-*arangetram* students in 2015, the element that came forth strongly was their sincere encouragement and motivation to each other. Each one paid attention to their commitments and rendered help to one another in terms of picking up or dropping each other off from work or home. Since practice for the programme was by them, each took on the task of correcting each other’s movements. Corrections were taken with positivity and there were some who knew how to keep the atmosphere balanced when situations became tense. I understood that the whole journey had its moments of rough tides. All the students unanimously agreed that the *arangetram* training period taught them endurance physically, mentally and emotionally. Presenting their *arangetram* instilled a sense of wanting to explore more deeply into the realm of *Bharata Natyam*. Whilst the *arangetram* training is totally directed by the teacher, this *Reflection* was directed entirely by the nine participants. Each participant took on various tasks and worked together to present this production. One of the participants, Pankhuri, mentions that the putting together of the production

was a tough and a learning journey, as all had to dance and practice actively and also look into many other areas of choreography, such as costume selection with the proper colour combination. All spent time viewing past videos to study the aesthetics of past productions and engaged in discussions towards improving the production. This, says Hema, is actually an extension of the *Bharata Natyam* training, where students get to clearly identify the proper execution of the basic dance steps or *adavus*.

Shankar Kandasamy agrees that more needs to be done to support continuity in post-*arangetram* learning. Shankar with a busy schedule has made efforts to present the senior students and *arangetram* students in overseas dance festivals both in ensemble and solo *margam*. Two such festivals were the Konark Dance Festival in Orissa, India, and the VRC Academy Music and Dance Festival in Bangalore, India.

At the Konark Dance Festival in December 2017, Shankar Kandasamy got senior students and post-*arangetram* students to perform a *Bharata Natyam* piece entitled “Bhavaiyami Raghuramam”. The chosen piece depicts the life story of Lord Rama. This piece offered the cast the challenge of portraying the characters in the entire story of the Ramayana epic. TFA administration sponsored all the dancers for the trip, comprising of four males and eight females. The live orchestra was put together by artists from Bangalore and Chennai known to Shankar Kandasamy.

I went along with the performing team as my eldest son was in the team and I wanted to experience the much talked about festival in Orissa. The team practiced at the Guru Kelu Charan Mohapatra *Odissi* Research Centre. The organising committee scheduled the other performing groups to have their rehearsals in this centre. The TFA dancers had the opportunity to meet many artists. One of the dancers, Harshini, developed a high fever one day before the performance and was diagnosed with chicken pox. With the strength of her teammates, Harshini performed and was even interviewed

by Odisha Live News (OdishaLIVEnews, 2017). The team expressed that more of such performance exposures would be beneficial to *arangetram* dancers. This could be one of the attractive platforms for *arangetram* students to continue dancing.

Most of the post-*arangetram* dancers keep abreast by teaching the beginners *Bharata Natyam* classes at TFA. This helps the dancers to learn how to impart the technique of teaching *Bharata Natyam* to the young children. There are at present ten post-*arangetram* dancers teaching at TFA and five more who teach the dance theory.

The continuity of further learning by post-*arangetram* dancers at TFA whilst it is nurtured by the institution can only develop in a profound manner by dancers who are both passionate and desire to venture into further learning. The institute itself need to seriously pave the way in giving opportunities to post-*arangetram* dancers by formally having a structured post-*arangetram* module to hone the growth of young talents. This is vital as the present teaching staff at TFA are between the ages of 55 to 75 years. The next generation of facilitators need to be prepared to carry on the TFA legacy started by its founder His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati.

As much as many post-*arangetram* dancers like to contribute their services, many have to sustain themselves by taking on full-time jobs that keep them occupied with no time for further learning. TFA is presently unable to provide attractive remuneration to employ interested talents on a full-time basis.

Thiagarajan (2011) describes TFA as “an arts institute at the forefront of the Malaysian arts scene, creating awareness and appreciation of Indian classical dance in the country” (pp. 131–133). I view the attempts of post-*arangetram* learning by TFA as commendable but that it can contribute more principally by offering more platforms to the post-*arangetram* students to evolve. The codified *Bharata Natyam* syllabus transmits a passage from one level to another where the dancers undergo structured



training that transforms the dancers gradually into young talented artists. I relate this process as a rite of passage, where the dance students experience a transformation at each stage of the TFA dance modules.

Another area that emerged from the interviews was to engage post-*arangetram* students to choreograph in small productions. This attempt can transit into a bigger perspective and build up a reserve of artistic talent for TFA.

TFA's efforts are in the initial stages of formulation . The support system as I have observed it needs more structure. Consistency in programmes needs to be heightened. Malar Gunaratnam projects the efforts to post-*arangetram* learning to gain more interest amidst *arangetram* students. In accordance with the concerns of senior students and teachers to expose the younger dancers to stage performance, Malar Gunaratnam mentioned that efforts were made in 2016 to provide an opportunity to a younger group of dancers through the experience of a performance called *Dhanyosmi*, in a unique celebration of tribal and folk dances. The word *dhanyosmi* means I am fortunate and blessed. This programme was put together by several teachers to impart to the younger dancers, especially Stage 3 and 4 students between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, the hard work involved in staging a production. All dancers involved had rigorous training and made time to come regularly for rehearsals that displayed a commitment to the peer group.

Since all dance pieces were ensemble pieces, attendance at the practices was a vital component that the dancers learnt to value. I had the opportunity to sit and watch one rehearsal of the “dandhya” piece, where a group of twelve dancers had to dance with sticks. The rehearsal was taken by Ravi Shetty and on this particular day, there were dancers who were absent. This truly hindered the practice as the dancers were getting confused of their positions and movement in formation. The whole production

imbibed different values at progressive levels from team work, time management, and responsibility in caring for the costumes, stage presentation, and parental co-operation.

In my final chapter, I will put forth my findings and recommendations that I gathered through my interviews with the students who completed their *arangetram*, senior and junior teachers and members of TFA management.

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## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1. Conclusions

The purpose of my study is to investigate the perceptions of *Bharata Natyam arangetram* among TFA dance students. This research is intended to explore the initiatives by TFA towards post-*arangetram* continuity. Thus my findings surround *arangetram* in three broad sections that are pre-*arangetram*, *arangetram* and post-*arangetram*.

The pre-*arangetram* period is the training of the dance pieces that will be presented on the *arangetram* performance day. This can last between two to three months on daily training sessions. This period is crucial in a students' training, as suitable songs are selected and choreographed. The student puts much effort into memorising and rehearsing the selected pieces.

The *arangetram* is the day that initiates a transition in the life of the student presenting the solo debut dance. All the physical hard work is tested, based on the dancer's capabilities and viewed by family, relatives and friends. The *arangetram* day marks a major social event. It is an occasion that marks a grade of achievement and postulates a higher status from all the years of training and marks a significant period in the life of the dancer. The student presenting the *arangetram* is elevated from a novice to a trained dancer.

Post-*arangetram* is the time when the dancer decides on the need to expand their knowledge in terms of exposure to more repertoires and finer nuances in *Bharata Natyam*. I have also added other areas that I observed relevant in the *arangetram* presentation. I interviewed thirty students and highlighted six, three female and two

male TFA dancers and one non-Indian female from Aswara, who encountered different issues in their *arangetram* journey.

This study aimed to examine the *Bharata Natyam* training that leads to *arangetram* and post-*arangetram* phenomenon at TFA Kuala Lumpur with the following objectives:

In the first objective of tracing the development of *Bharata Natyam* dance training at TFA from the 1980s to the current period, it was found that TFA's founder Swami Shantanand Saraswati paved the way by bringing together two illustrious dance masters Sivadas and Gopal Shetty to pool their talents to develop TFA's *Bharata Natyam* department. The *Bharata Natyam* training saw several changes periodically. With the *adavu* syllabus being structured by Suryakala from Chennai, *Bharata Natyam* training necessitated the introduction of practical exams at different stages to up-grade the quality of training and output by the students. The exam structure was formulated till *arangetram* level.

In the second objective, TFA's *arangetram* modules are strongly designed by assessments, exam presentations and grades. The practical exams became a feature of TFA's *Bharata Natyam* training. Students are trained to experience the demands of how the preparation and presentation of an *arangetram* would be at the *margam* exam preparation. The *margam* exam is marked strictly to ensure that students present their *margam* performance qualitatively. The students as well as the teachers face several challenges during the pre-*arangetram* training as this involves long hours of daily practice. Both students and teachers have to schedule their time productively and make adjustments to their daily routine. Most students in pre-*arangetram* training are students who have completed their form five exams or have just begun their college or university

studies. There are some who postpone their further studies in order to give their undivided commitment to the pre-*arangetram* training.

To summarise the third objective, the continuity of further learning by post-*arangetram* dancers at TFA, whilst it is nurtured by the institution, can only develop in a profound manner by dancers who are both passionate and desire to venture into further learning. The institute itself needs to seriously pave the way in giving opportunities to post-*arangetram* dancers by formally having a structured post-*arangetram* module to hone the growth of young talents. This is vital as the present teaching staff at TFA are in their senior years, between the ages of 55 to 75 years. The next generation of facilitators needs to be prepared to carry on the TFA legacy started by its founder His Holiness Swami Shantanand Saraswati. I posit that TFA's exam structure instils a level of seriousness in dance where the student learns to focus on a separation from the normal routine to focus on the training for the dance practical assessments and exams.

It is close to Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, where he observes human behaviour transits through stages from one social situation to the next. Each exam level administers a transition of higher focus and discipline in the students. The major challenge takes place when the students are preparing for their *arangetram*. Van Gennep's rites of passage of the three phases of separation, liminality and reaggregation synthesised when the student in the worship and practice stage—the pre-*arangetram* phase—experiences a separation from her normal routine and self and goes through a liminal phase before entering an *arangetram*. The completion of an *arangetram* performance is the final stage of achievement with a status in the eye of family and society.

Thiagarajan (2011) describes TFA as an arts institute at the forefront of the Malaysian arts scene, creating awareness and appreciation of Indian classical dance in

the country (pp. 131–133). I view the attempts of post-*arangetram* learning by TFA favourably yet they can contribute more principally by offering more platforms to post-*arangetram* students to evolve. The codified *Bharata Natyam* syllabus transmits a passage from one level to another where the dancers undergo structured training that transforms the dancers gradually into young talented artists.

I relate this process as a rite of passage, where the dance students experience a transformation at each stage of the TFA dance modules. Van Gennep states that rituals pass three phases; a period of segregation, a state of transition or limen phase and aggregation or post-liminal phase. The second phase, which is the limen phase, is a period where one experiences a transition or enters a new phase in their life.

Post-*arangetram* learning at TFA has begun to pick up momentum since 2015. More post-*arangetram* students are showing keenness towards further learning either in practical performance or theoretical knowledge. TFA's efforts are in the initial stages of formulation. The support system as I have observed it needs more structure. Consistency in programmes needs to be heightened. Malar Gunaratnam projects the efforts to post-*arangetram* learning to gain more interest amidst *arangetram* students.

## **5.2. Recommendations**

The findings of this study may implicate more efforts by dance heads to provide more platforms for post-*arangetram* learning. As one of TFA's senior dance directors Malar Gunaratnam points out, if learning comes to a halt after an *arangetram*, the dancers can become shallow in their knowledge and miss the depth of attaining more information in the vast realm of *Bharata Natyam*. In the future, *Bharata Natyam* dance teachers can only teach in limitations of knowledge (M. Gunaratnam, personal communication, July 27, 2016).

Therefore, it is important to provide a structured component or platform to engage post-*arangetram* students in continuous learning to become holistic dancers and teachers. Students who complete *arangetram* suggest some components, such as the study of *nattuvangam*, choreography, study of Hindu mythology, stage sound and lighting techniques, the study of *natya sastra* participation in more dance productions locally and internationally. One of the interviewees, Shona, expressed that once a consistent component is planned, more students will be keen on post-*arangetram* learning.

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## APPENDIX A

### Her tryst with Bharatanatyam

#### FRIDAY REVIEW

February 21, 2014

Kumudha Bharathram, The Hindu

MEET Guru Suryakala, who has dedicated her life to the fine arts, especially dance.



#### Technically virtuous: Guru Suryakala.

Guru Suryakala. He wrote the varnam, 'Annaiyai Maravain Adi' in Aboghi, specially for young children to perform. He composed and choreographed the historic novel, 'Sivagamiyin Sabadham' with 108 ragas. Till today, there are 8 steps in each Bharatanatyam adavu that correspond to the eight syllables in adi talam, as related by him. Thilang, Bhagyasri and Hamsanandi were among his favourite ragas and he often used them in his ragamalika compositions. Listening to facts such as these about the iconic Guru K. N. Dhandayudhapani Pillai was indeed a chance to get a closer view of his art and his style, through one of his foremost disciples

Guru Suryakala, the international director of The Temple of Fine Arts, is a singer, a nattuvanar and a fine teacher, like many senior gurus of her generation. Only, in her case, each of the skills are remarkable enough to be an independent vocation.

The ease with which she projects her wonderful voice, be it Mohanam or Thodi, together with powerful nattuvangam, is a talent few in the fraternity can boast of. She took to Bharatanatyam as a young girl with natural ease, what with her mother being a musician. At 20, she started learning under Dhandayudhapani Pillai. Living up to his high standards and deciding to be by his side forever, learning and serving the art form, took the next 10 years of her life.

### **Plenty to learn**

“Watching Guru Dhandayuthapani Pillai as he composed, choreographed and taught was all I did. Learning happened unconsciously. In fact, he would playfully call me, ‘Tape Recorder’,” says Guru Suryakala. “He insisted that while singing for dance, bhava and raga should be equal, and that the singer should add sangatis that complement the choreography.”

Guru Suryakala recalls several learning opportunities while singing and doing nattuvangam for some of her guru’s prominent students including Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa.

One of Suryakala’s biggest and most memorable moments was when she was praised by her guru for the first time, when she completed a jathiswaram in Kanada which he left for her to finish. As she finished, doors opened with a loud praise and a raise in her allowance from rupees 50 to 75. She vividly remembers her guru’s gesture on stage, when he asked her to take over the nattuvangam during his last arangetram. He passed away two days after that.

The subsequent phase of Guru Suryakala's life was her rendezvous with destiny. "Art, just for the love of it," the concept of Swami Shantanand Saraswathi, that drew her to The Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) decades ago, still remains the purpose of her life. During one of her trips to Malaysia, she met the founding teachers of TFA, who invited her to teach them.

From that first step, as TFA grew from its infancy to become a grand institution, guru Suryakala has come a long way under the guidance of the founder of the institution and her spiritual guru, Swami Shantanand Saraswathi. Right from setting up centres, grooming senior teachers and dancers, actively contributing to many of the TFA's international productions, to recording a corpus of Bharatanatyam pieces, she remains one of the strongest pillars of the institution.

Technically virtuous as Guru Suryakala is, she also possesses an undeniable purity in her artistry. Guru Dhandayuthapani Pillai's beautiful poetry goes 'Needhiyum, Nermaiye, Nenjinil Urudhiyum, Nilai Pera Kaapadhe, Kalaiyagum' that modestly translates as 'To uphold virtuousness, integrity and fortitude remain the very purpose of fine arts.' Every slice of Suryakala's life remains true to these words.

***Guru Suryakala is an accomplished singer, a capable nattuvanar and a fine teacher.***

**APPENDIX B**  
**REFLECTIONS**



***Reflections* is a story woven in dance, about the friendship of nine friends. Photo: Temple Of Fine Arts**

(This article appeared in Star2 written by Revathi Murugappan)

**Reflections: Friends that dance together dancing as one**

May 26, 2015

By Revathi Murugappan, Star 2

William Shakespeare once said that a friend is one that knows you as you are, understands where you have been, accepts what you have become, and still, gently allows you to grow.

For nine individuals who met while taking dance classes at the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) in Kuala Lumpur, their friendship has grown from strength to strength as they hone their skills in various dance styles at the sanctuary for the arts.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the friends have laughed, teased, fought, disagreed and supported each other in their dance journey.

Later, an idea struck. Why not share their exciting tale with others?

And that's how dance production *Reflections* came about. It is a story woven in dance, reciting how they found each other in a space that gave them an outlet to express, explore and experiment while growing up.

(Read more at <https://www.star2.com/culture/arts/2015/05/26/reflections-friends-that-dance-together-dancing-as-one/#SuYBU3uhvKg8tB5O.99>)

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**APPENDIX C**

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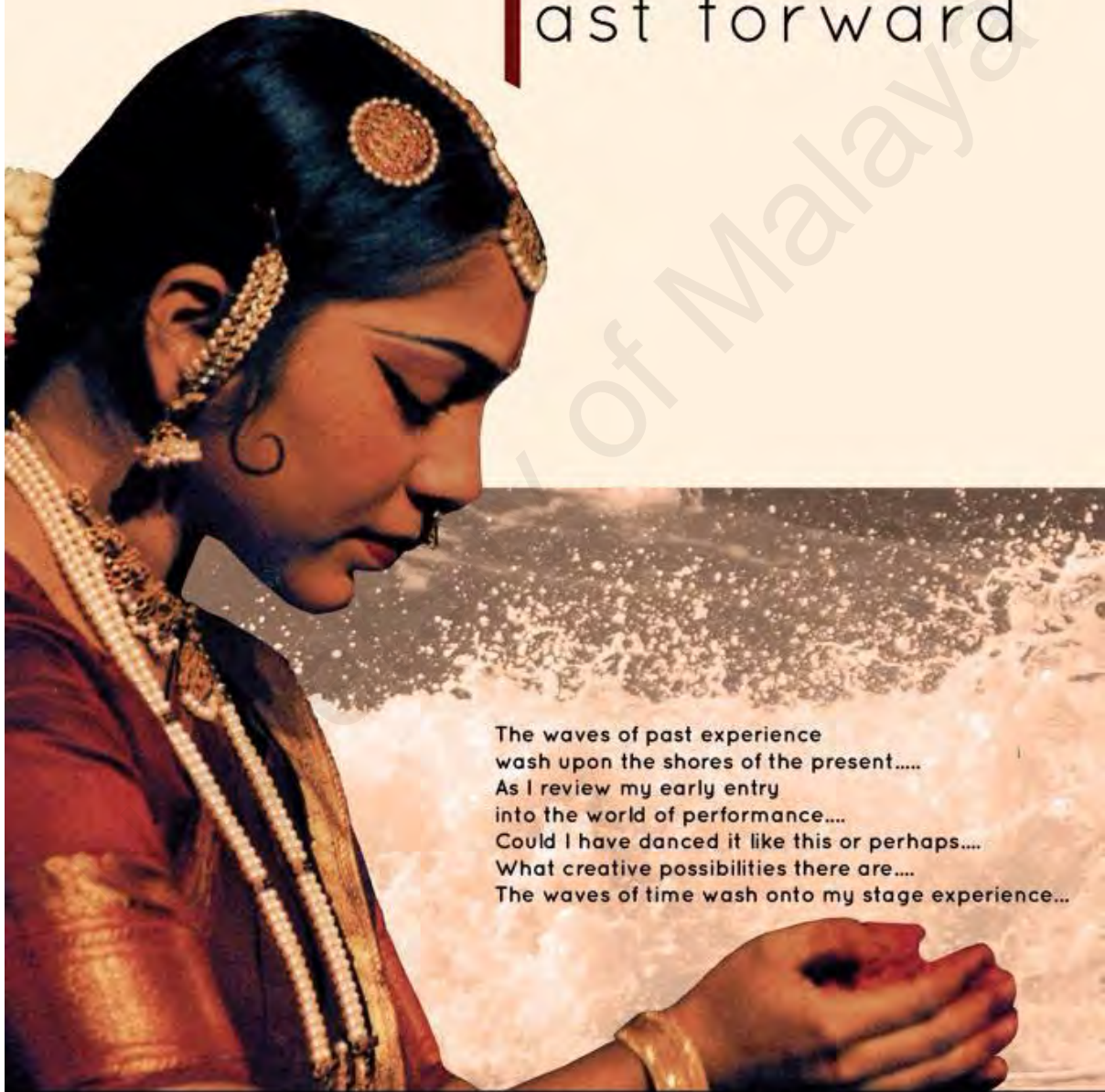


The Temple of Fine Arts  
proudly presents

Hemavathi Sivanesan in

# purva

ast forward



The waves of past experience  
wash upon the shores of the present....  
As I review my early entry  
into the world of performance....  
Could I have danced it like this or perhaps....  
What creative possibilities there are....  
The waves of time wash onto my stage experience...

25th Oct 2014 @ 7 pm | Kanagasabai The Temple of Fine Arts | All are welcome



Ramanan(mridanggist), Shankar(nattuvaangist), Bhooma (Vocalist), Sridhar(flutist) & Kanagamani(violin) with Hema

(Poster and photo: Temple of Fine Arts K L)

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## APPENDIX D



TFA's Mass Arangetram Graduation Ceremony in 1991

(Photo: Temple of Fine Arts K L).

## APPENDIX E

### Researcher Information Form



### Researcher Information Form



Name: Bhanumathi K. Nadson  
Matrix No: RGK 130001  
E-mail: [bhanumathi23@yahoo.com](mailto:bhanumathi23@yahoo.com)  
Address: 17-B, Jalan Mariamah, Johor Bahru 80100,  
H/P: 0167485288

Title of my research study:



"Bharathanatyam Training at the Temple of FineArts":  
Pre-Arangetram, Arangetram and Post-Arangetram.

I am in the midst of my research thesis for my master's degree. I am a Temple of Fine Arts dance teacher in Johor Bahru. You are being invited to take part in a research study. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

- I need to chat with dance students, parents and teachers.
- Questionnaires will be prepared for you and if you decide to participate please fill and pass this to me.
- I may communicate with you through email too.
- Please be assured that our identity will be confidential.

Appreciate very much if you could give your assistance.

'Thank you for reading this.'

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_  
Gender: M \_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_  
Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Contact number: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Current Job: \_\_\_\_\_

Is your daughter learning Bharatanatyam at TFA?

Yes

No

Her age now? \_\_\_\_\_

Currently at what stage is she in?

Stage 1

Stage 2

Stage 3

Stage 4

Stage 5

Stage 6

At what age did she start her Bharatanatyam classes? \_\_\_\_\_ yrs;

What prompted you to join your child for Bharatanatyam classes?

\_\_\_\_\_

Besides Bharatanatyam, is your child learning any other disciplines?

\_\_\_\_\_

How did you come to know of The Temple of Fine Art?

\_\_\_\_\_

Any cultural values learnt by your child in her classes? Please specify.

\_\_\_\_\_

✓ Please put a tick in the selected column.

	Questions	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
1.	How do you find the dance syllables?				
2.	How do you find the teaching skills of the dance teacher?				
3.	What changes would you like to see implemented?	Please write your comment below.			
4.	Communication between the teacher and student.				
5.	Communication between the teacher and parent with regards to your child's progress in class.				
6.	The TFA building structure and facilities.				
7.	Orientation of the Bharatanatyam course when you first registered.				
8.	Dance practical assessments & exams.				
9.	How is the your communication with the other parents?				

1. Your general comments:

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Thank You for sharing your thoughts

## APPENDIX F

### Questionnaire sent through email to selected participants

Dear All, Am trying to write a paper and appreciate very much if you could furnish me with your replies. Your identity will be protected and kept confidential. (2015)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Studying/working/profession (give details):

Reason for starting Bharatanatyam:

Age and year started learning:

Are your parents and you Shiva family members?

At what level of Bharatanatyam this year?

Year completed arangetram?

If completed arangetram are you tutoring at TFA?

How many classes do you tutor a week?

Are you being paid for your services?

What is your opinion on female dancers becoming professional dancers?

What are your views on the dance practical & theory syllables of TFA.

Your Dance status at this point of time?

What changes would you like to see happening in the Bharatanatyam dance section?

---

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Nattuvangam* is the art of singing and playing the cymbals at the same time, thus conducting the whole dance (Rao, 1990, p. 41). The period of establishment was in the early 1980s to the current period.
- <sup>2</sup> My dance gurus K.P. Bhaskar and Santha Baskar. K.P. Bhaskar was one of the Indian dance pioneers who came to Singapore in 1952. Together with his wife Santha, herself an accomplished dance exponent and teacher of great repute, they propagated and innovated various genres of Indian dance forms for close to six decades. K.P. Bhaskar founded Bhaskar's Arts Academy. Nriithalaya Aesthetic Society is a wing of Bhaskar's Arts Academy (Bhaskar, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> *Nandikesvara* was the second century AD author of *Abhinaya Darpana* (The mirror of gesture). This is an important text in the treatment of gestures used in dance and theatre (Gosh, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> Shankar Kandasamy, trained in *Bharata Natyam*, *Odissi*, Western Classical Ballet and other regional classical Indian styles, heads the *Bharata Natyam* faculty of TFA, where he was trained and continues to serve as artistic director, choreographer and performer. A graduate of the University of Auckland in New Zealand, Shankar went on to hone his artistic skills at the Kalai Kaviri College of Fine Arts Bharatidasan University in India. He is an advisor on the National Arts Awards panel of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage in Malaysia.
- <sup>5</sup> Shiva family: A name referring to Swami Shantanand's regular followers, whose activities are primarily utilitarian in nature and service oriented in spirit (Subramanyam, 1994, p. 12).
- <sup>6</sup> K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai was an Indian classical dancer and choreographer, considered by many as one of the leading exponents of *Bharata Natyam*. He joined Rukmini Arundale's Kalakshetra as a teacher and taught there for a number of years.
- <sup>7</sup> Kumari Suryakala is a direct disciple of K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai. Suryakala learnt under her guru in the truest sense of guru Kula vaasa, where she lived and served her guru learning the art form of *Bharata Natyam*. (refer to Appendix A for an article on her).
- <sup>8</sup> In this context, *namaskaram* is a bowing combined with the touching of the feet, a common mark of respect in Indian culture (www.macmillandictionary.com).
- <sup>9</sup> A composition with words, and syllables used to denote a particular *adavu*.
- <sup>10</sup> Rukmini Arundale was an Indian classical dancer who led the renaissance of the *Bharata Natyam* dance form and founded the Kalashetra Foundation in Chennai. She was also a theosophist, who was greatly inspired by Annie Besant, the Theosophical Society's British cofounder and president (www.thefamouspeople.com).
- <sup>11</sup> T. Balasaraswathi was a celebrated Indian dancer, who was one of the twentieth century's foremost exponents of the *Bharata Natyam* style of classical dance. She was instrumental not only in expanding the performance of this dance form beyond the precincts of the temples where it was traditionally performed but also in cultivating international appreciation of the art form (www.britannica.com).
- <sup>12</sup> *Alarippu* is an invocation dance performed at the beginning of every *Bharata Natyam* recital (Rao, 1980, p. 3).
- <sup>13</sup> A *nritta* item set to simple *adavu* patterns are performed to this composition (Rao, 1980, p. 24).
- <sup>14</sup> *Shabdham* is the first item in a *Bharata Natyam* recital that makes use of *abhinaya* (Rao, 1980, p. 53).
- <sup>15</sup> *Varnam* is the piece de resistance of a *Bharata Natyam* recital, requiring skill in *abhinaya*, *tala* and execution of *adavu jathis* (Rao, 1980, p. 67).
- <sup>16</sup> *Shringara rasa* is the *rasa* or sentiment of love, which is determined by the seasons, garlands and unguents, ornaments, the company of the beloved, beautiful gardens, seeing or dallying with the beloved, sweet words (Rao, 1980, p. 55).



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- <sup>17</sup> *Nritya* is pure dance with no specific theme, containing *adavus*, rhythm patterns, poses and *adavu jatis*, such as *Alarippu*, *Jathiswaram thillana*, etc. (Rao, 1980, p. 43).
- <sup>18</sup> *Abhishekam* is a Sanskrit word meaning “springkling” or “wetting” and refers to the Hindu ritual of pouring water or other sacred substances on a statue of a deity while also chanting mantras. It is akin to *puja*, another Sanskrit word that means worship. The principle behind *abhishekam* is total surrender to and love of the deity. It is believed that by bathing the statue, the devotees cleanse and purify their own minds (www.yogapedia.com).
- <sup>19</sup> *Abhishekam* is a Sanskrit word meaning “springkling” or “wetting” and refers to the Hindu ritual of pouring water or other sacred substances on a statue of a deity while also chanting mantras. It is akin to *puja*, another Sanskrit word that means worship. The principle behind *abhishekam* is total surrender to and love of the deity. It is believed that by bathing the statue, the devotees cleanse and purify their own minds (www.yogapedia.com).
- <sup>20</sup> Geetha Sridhar is a *Bharata Natyam* dancer and teacher and London resident. She is a dance lecturer at Kingston University and the head of dance at London School of Carnatic Music.

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