

## **Indian Classical Dance and the Development of Cultural Identity in the Indian Diaspora**

By Dr. Madhavi Menon

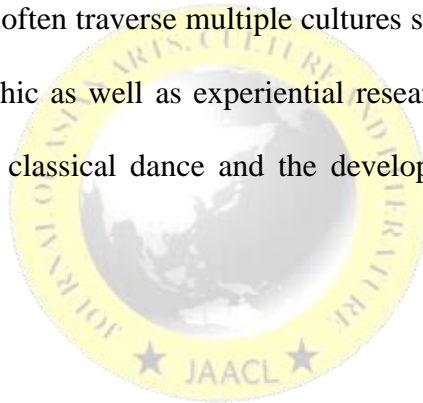
[madhavi@nova.edu](mailto:madhavi@nova.edu)

### **Abstract**

Cultural identity can be broadly defined as a person's self-view vis a vis their identity or perception of belonging to a larger group or collective. Cultural identity is hence focal to a person's identity and influences how they see themselves, as well as how they relate to the world. The development of cultural identity can be especially challenging for members of the Indian diaspora, who often traverse multiple cultures simultaneously. The current paper reviews dance ethnographic as well as experiential research to explore the links between engagement with Indian classical dance and the development of cultural identity in the Indian diaspora.

### **Keywords**

Cultural identity, Indian classical dance, Indian diaspora



## Introduction

With over 17 million Indians living outside the country (United Nations, 2019), and many more people of Indian origin adding to that number, the question of preserving one's cultural identity often takes center stage for people in the Indian diaspora. Living so far away from home, there is an increased need for maintaining the Indian cultural heritage and customs and passing them along to the succeeding generations. In addition to speaking their native language, cooking and eating native food, and observing the multitude of Indian festivals, this is also often accomplished by signing children up for 'Bal-vihar' shloka classes, Indian classical music/dance lessons, and participation in cultural festivals and events organized by local Indian organizations. The present paper focuses on exploring how cultural engagement influences the development of identity, and the role of performing arts, specifically engagement in classical Indian dance in the development of cultural identity.

In a diverse country such as the United States of America, one can witness a plethora of cultures, ranging from a Dragon Dance during the Chinese New Year celebrations, the Obon dances of the Japanese, and the Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Raas, or Bhangra performances during Pongal, Navratri, or Diwali festivities. A casual observer might wonder why expatriates have this seeming urgency to reaffirm and recreate activities and beliefs which are so vastly different from those native to their adopted land. Medha Yodh (1988/1989) believes that an expatriate by default has a dual identity: a *public identity* which adheres to their adopted country's social, cultural, and ethical norms, and a *private identity* which retains and reflects their own cultural norms;

thereby making the quintessential expatriate seek that fine balance between their public and private identities. This of course behooves us the question regarding the private identity of members of the Indian diaspora, namely, “*What is an Indian identity?*” Sudhir Kakar (2012) posits that *Indianness* is a sum total of an individual’s cultural, historical, and psychological influences, wherein the ensuing network of social roles, traditional values, and customs play a significant role. According to Kakar, individuals intuitively subscribe and accept these prescribed codes as indicative of their *Indianness*.

The very act of moving away from the homeland and establishing residence in a new country can create a schism in a person’s self-representation with regards to the degree of identification with their culture of origin and their adopted culture. Experiencing a sense of uncertainty about one’s connect (or disconnect) with the native culture of the homeland and the new cultural values and ethos in the adopted land, are part and parcel of the typical process of immigrant adjustment (Tummala- Narra, 2014). Navarrete and Jenkins (2011) posit that in the United States of America, individuals belonging to a minority group could experience feeling different and underrepresented within the larger American majority culture, and such a perception could potentially lead to feelings of isolation and a sense of rejection by the dominant culture.

To overcome such feelings, creating a “home away from home” becomes sacrosanct for many immigrants, and they make concerted efforts to recreate the culture, language, festivals, and religious beliefs of their native land. Anecdotal evidence is rich with parental accounts of how having their children engaged with Indian arts particularly the learning of classical Indian dance has helped them preserve that sense of *Indianness* in the next generation. Shay (2006) contends that engagement with Indian dance is a significant

channel for the establishment and creation of cultural heritage and identity. The Indian traditional dance forms, owing to their links to the broader Indian cultural ethos, traditions, and values, are hence highly regarded by the Indian diaspora settled across the world. Learning the traditional Indian dance forms within the diaspora is thus viewed as something more than a mere extracurricular activity, with the dance's history and identity itself being culturally entwined with India's national identity (Kaeppler, 2004; O'Shea, 2003). Noted Indian dance scholar Kapila Vatsyayan (1983), writes:

*“My studies began with the practice of Indian dance, but soon I realized that Indian dance was not a mere matter of articulating the different limbs of the human body. ...[it] was the most chiseled expression of a larger and more complex background of an Indian worldview and its distinctive speculative thought... I have thus come to the conclusion, rightly or wrongly, that “dance”, especially in the Indian context, cannot be viewed in isolation from the most significant framework of the philosophic thought and psychical concerns of the Indian people.”*

Vatsyayan thus underscores the importance of understanding the significance of Indian dance in the larger cultural context. Deidre Sklar (1991), a Western dance scholar complements Vatsyayan, and views dance as encompassing all aspects of life, thereby positioning dance in the broader context of social relationships, religion, environment, politics, economics, and history. Given the aforementioned links between Indian dance and the wider *Indianness*, it is not surprising that engagement with Indian classical dance is associated with the development of cultural identity in the Indian diaspora.

While the dance ethnographic literature is rife with dance scholars extolling the strong links between dance and the development of cultural identity, experiential research study findings also give strong support to these associations. For instance, Thomas (2015) explored cultural identity in adolescent girls through embodied narratives where the girls used movement and choreography to express their cultural stories over a period of ten weeks that culminated in a final performance. The girls reported feeling more empowered, and the final performance revealed how choreography can bring together the various parts of an individual's identity and present a unique representation of their experiences. This experiential study thus gives support for anecdotal evidence and reiterates the links between dance and the development of cultural identity. Similarly, Rousseau and colleagues (2005) conducted a ten-week dance/drama workshop with immigrant and refugee high school students. Over the ten-week workshop, the researchers found that the immigrant adolescents began to see the commonalities between their distinct identities and question the dichotomy between their adopted country and native country's identities, and eventually develop a stronger personal and cultural identity. Salazar (2018) used a dance-based paradigm to assess the development of cultural identity in elementary school-aged immigrant children in Boston and found that movement, symbolism, and the broader arts did indeed positively influence the exploration and development of cultural identity.



**Image 1: Indian child posing dance mudra**



**Image 2: Performing dance in a temple**

It is important to note that these research experiential studies used rudimentary movement techniques and not the more nuanced and culturally immersive Indian classical dance forms in their experiential paradigms. However, the fact that these studies found significant associations between dance movement and the development of cultural identity in immigrant children, gives even greater credence to the links between engagement in classical Indian dance forms which are steeped in the Indian culture and ethos, and the development of cultural identity in the Indian diaspora.

## References

1. Kaeppler, A. L. (2004). Recycling tradition: A Hawaiian case study. *Dance Chronicle*, 27(3), 293–311.
2. Kakar, S. (2012). *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Oxford India Perennials.
3. Navarrete, V., & Jenkins, S. R. (2011). Cultural homelessness, multiminority status, ethnic identity development, and self-esteem. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35, 791-804.
4. O'Shea, Janet. (2003). *At Home in the World? The Bharata Natyam Dancer as Transnational Interpreter*. Papers from the Department of Dance and Theatre Studies. 47.
5. Rousseau, C., Gauthier, M. F., Lacroix, L., Alain, N., Benoit, M., Moran, A., ... Bourassa, D. (2005). Playing with identities and transforming shared realities: Drama therapy workshops for adolescent immigrants and refugees. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 32, 13–27.

6. Salazar, K.A. (2018). *Promoting Cultural Identity Through Dance/Movement Therapy with Immigrant Children*. Capstone Thesis, Lesley University.
7. Shay, A. (2006). *Choreographing identities: Folk dance, ethnicity and festival in the United States and Canada*. Jefferson, MC: McFarland.
8. Sklar, D. (1991). On Dance Ethnography. *Dance Research Journal*, 23:1, pp. 6–10.
9. Thomas, E. (2015). The dance of cultural identity: Exploring race and gender with adolescent girls. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 37, 176–196.
10. Tummala-Narra, P. (2014). Cultural identity in the context of trauma and immigration from a psychoanalytic perspective. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31, 396-409.
11. United Nations (2019). *International Migrant Stock*. Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.  
<https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>
12. Vatsyayan, K. (1983). *The Square and the Circle of the Indian Arts*, Roli Books International, New Delhi.
13. Yodh, M. (1988/1989). Bharata Natyam: Dance and Identity, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 29 (4), pp. 673-676.