

## A Note from the Author

**B**haratanatyam is a classical dance form that originated in India nearly 2000 years ago. It has three key elements—emotion (*bhava*), music (*raga*), and beat (*tala*). Together, they blend with dance (*natya*) to give the art form its name—*bha-ra-ta-natyam*.

In the many bharatanatyam performances that I've watched over the years, male dancers have been a rare sight. Dressed in fine silks and jewelry, female dancers often overshadowed the men on stage. And though men were recognized as highly skilled dance teachers, they were not given equal importance as dance performers. Instead, their gender identity was questioned, and their role confined to providing the accompanying music and beat.

Today, bharatanatyam is performed all over the world. In the United States, this dance form is seen as a way for the Indian-American community to stay connected with their heritage. Unfortunately, learning this classical dance is often considered an activity for girls.

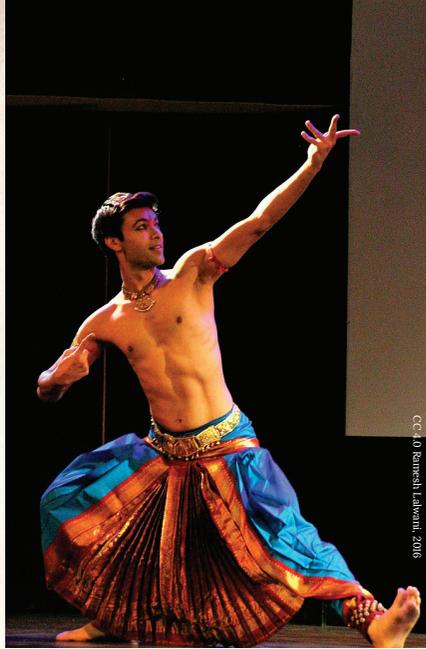


Top: A bharatanatyam dancer dressed for a performance  
Below: A dancer demonstrating a mudra with two hands





Below: Revanta Sarabhai on stage



Top: V P Dhananjayan (L) and Satyajit Dhananjayan (R)  
Below: Dancer Raghunath Manet on stage



Boys neither gain exposure to the art form, nor are they encouraged to try it out. Those who do take the plunge often discontinue their learning, either because of social pressure to conform to masculine norms, or lack of peer influence.

Though their struggles are ongoing, things are changing for the better for male dancers everywhere. Thanks to veteran dancers like C. V. Chandrasekhar and V. P. Dhananjayan, men are now stepping up to break gender barriers in pursuit of their ambitions. They don silk garments, jewelry, and makeup to highlight the facial expressions so vital to Bharatanatyam. Some have even carved out their unique styles of expression and storytelling. In India, dancers like Vaibhav Arekar, Praveen Kumar, and Zakir Hussain have established a name for themselves through determination, hard work, and innovation. In the United States, professional dancers like Melvin Varghese and Jeeno Joseph have defied gender stereotyping and followed their passion for dance. Today, they celebrate the art form through performances and workshops to encourage all aspiring dancers, regardless of their gender.

I hope that this book will inspire you to listen to your heart and relentlessly pursue your own passion.