

“My Heritage” Essay Submitted at Bhartiya Samaj of Central Florida’s website (www.BSCFL.com)

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Submitted Essay:

Smile. Straighten your back and don’t forget the moves. I anxiously enter the darkened stage with thousands of eyes watching my every move, mentally replaying the performance that I had spent hours and weeks practicing. The spotlight falls directly on me, illuminating my vibrant saree and the golden jewelry that covers my wrist, ankles, neck, and hair. The sharp exhilarating sounds of my foot striking the ground begins to ring in my ear, as my head starts to throb trying to keep my heart on pace with the beats coming from the Thattukali (an instrument made up of a wooden stick and a wooden block). A surge of adrenaline goes through my body, giving me the confidence to begin performing my choreography in front of the audience, as a start to reminisce about my passion for Bharatanatyam.

Growing up in a country where being Indian is considered a minority, my ethnic heritage has always been an integral part of who I am. Because of the cultural barrier between the society in which I was raised and the one in which my parents grew up, my parents taught me the value of my Indian ancestry by sharing stories about India's rich history and celebrating numerous traditional festivals. Being exposed to various cultural activities and movies at home from an early age, I was intrigued by the elegant gestures and brilliant colors of the traditional Indian dance, Bharatanatyam. I was captivated by the dancers' ease of telling different stories of Hindu Gods and Goddesses through their emotions and movements.

As I got older, I began to take dance classes and instantly fell in love with the discipline and artistry of Bharatanatyam. I spent endless hours perfecting my skills under the guidance of my Guru, who taught me the dance's technical elements as well as its deeper cultural and spiritual significance. I discovered that the dance form is more than just a form of entertainment; it is an art form deeply rooted in my culture and spiritual traditions, allowing me to connect with my origins and grasp my place in the world.

One of my proudest moments was performing at the Tampa Hindu Temple to raise money for Indian farmers, where I conveyed the struggles and discrimination they face through dance. The performance emphasized the importance of Karma, how our actions have a ripple effect on the world around us, and the principle of Sanskara, that one's character is shaped by their past actions and experiences. It served as a sobering reminder of historical injustices and the necessity for reform, as well as a call to action for everyone to accept responsibility for their actions and work toward a better future for everyone. I felt very honored and privileged to utilize my skills to improve the lives of others, as this performance taught me the transformative power of art as a tool for social change.

Taking that memorable experience to heart, I discovered a chance to display my Indian heritage and dance in front of my classmates at a local talent show. I was first concerned that my peers would not understand or appreciate

my dance form or cultural background. Despite my hesitation, I took the stage and began to perform. As they were introduced to something new and unfamiliar, I noticed a spark of wonder and interest in their eyes. That experience changed my perspective; I was no longer afraid to share my culture and heritage with others, and I realized how important it was to share the beauty and richness of Indian culture.

Since then, I have performed at several cultural events, most recently being a performance on India's Independence Day for the Barithya Samaj of Central Florida, where I utilized various Indian dance forms to commemorate India's freedom. Overall, displaying my Indian lineage through Bharatanatyam has been a fulfilling experience for me. It has taught me the importance of sharing my heritage with others, breaking down cultural barriers, and promoting understanding and acceptance. After reflecting on the lasting influence Bharatanatyam had on me, I continue to dance with the Thattukali to tell stories through my movements as a means of preserving my heritage and connecting with my roots.