Fluctuating "Indianness" or "Belonging": Singapore Indian Dancers and Their Encounter with Southeast Asia at Ramayana Festival

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ABSTRACT—This article investigates the dynamic relationship between cultural heritage and regional identity among the Indian diaspora in Singapore, specifically focusing on the experiences of classical Indian dancers. Historically, the process of "Indianization" deeply influenced the cultural landscape of Southeast Asia, evidenced by the regional prominence of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Using the context of a regional Ramayana Festival, this paper analyzes how Singaporean Indian dancers, while performing art forms rooted in the Indian subcontinent, negotiate their identity when confronted with diverse Southeast Asian interpretations of the same epic narrative. The study argues that this encounter forces a critical negotiation between the essentialized notion of "Indianness" (the perceived homeland culture) and a localized sense of "Belonging" within the Southeast Asian region. The dancers' performance becomes a site where two impulses intersect: the desire to preserve the purity of classical tradition and the acknowledgment of a unique, diasporic reality. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that identity for the Singapore Indian community is not fixed but is a fluctuating, active process, continuously shaped by regional cultural dialogue and revealing a distinctive Southeast Asian Indian consciousness.

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1.Introduction

In July 2017, I came across an interesting incident relevant to Indian culture in Bangkok. My Thai friend took me to a local restaurant in the evening, and on the way, we got caught in a traffic jam, so he turned on the TV in the car as usual. What surprised me was seeing the Indian TV series, "Mahabharata," in Thai on the display screen. The program was a remake of the 1988 smash hit TV series of the same name. To satisfy my curiosity, I asked him what motivated him to watch this program. He replied as if it were nothing special, "I often watch this program whenever I get caught in a traffic jam. It is good for killing time. For Thai people, the story is very familiar, and there are many good lessons for our daily life." This episode demonstrated the relevance of the major Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, to people's daily life in contemporary Thai society. It also raised the question of how these epics relate to the daily lives of the Indian diasporas in Singapore, where I have been conducting my fieldwork.

The commercial and cultural exchanges between India and other regions, particularly Southeast Asia, influenced by the historical process of Indianization, led to the introduction of the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, in those regions from the 9th century onward. These epics played a significant role in the development of written language and oral tradition while also transforming into various art forms, including dance, drama, shadow plays, paintings, sculpture, and architecture in each of these countries (Krishnan 1997, 9). Thus, over an extended period, these epics established their cultural sphere in India and Southeast Asian countries. However, the circumstances in Singapore differ from those in other Southeast Asian nations, with the Ramayana and Mahabharata traditions being predominantly maintained among the Indian diasporas.

In 2024, approximately 35.42 million Indians were living overseas (The New Indian Express 2025). Indian dance and music were transmitted and transformed on a global scale due to the migration of Indians, even before the term "globalization" was coined. James Clifford (1992) discusses this phenomenon in the following way: "Travelers move about under strong cultural, political, and economic compulsions, and that certain travelers are materially privileged, others oppressed...

Travel, in this view, denotes a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledge, stories, traditions, music, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions" (Clifford 1992, 108). Clifford defines "travel" as a translated term because of its class, gender, and race associations, and because in the process of translation itself, one can learn a lot about peoples, cultures, and histories that are different from one's own. The Indian diasporas abroad place a high value on culture and tradition in preserving their "Indianness." Indeed, Indian dance and music are actively carried on and performed among them, and today, non-Indians also learn and perform those traditions in various parts of the world.

Previous studies discuss that performing arts are often produced and consumed in a multicultural, multiethnic, and sometimes postcolonial arena in which a variety of artistic endeavors, aesthetic values, and political interests interact and compete (Um 2005, 6). Without a doubt, performing arts are increasingly influenced by intercultural creativity and situated in a multicultural setting in the current postmodern and globalized environment. Today, Singapore Indian performing arts groups often represent Singapore as a symbol of a multicultural society at international events and arts festivals, both domestically and internationally, including in India. Athough there has been a growing accumulation of research on Indian diaspora communities in recent years, the story of individual of Indian diasporas and their experiences have received little consideration within a growing body of research (1). John Tomlinson (1999) defines globalization as an empirical condition of the modern world, made possible by what he calls "complex connectivity." He points out that globalization refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and inter-dependences that characterize modern social life (Tomlinson 1999, 1-2). In this regard, it is important to consider how globalization has emerged in individuals, how individuals are connected to others and the outside world, and how their experiences influence their identities and belonging. This paper will focus on the incident of Singapore Indian dancers and their encounters with Southeast Asia at the Ramayana Festivals in Bangkok. Firstly, it will explore the process of transmission and the evolution of Indian performing arts in Singapore during the 20th century. Secondly, it will pay brief attention to the Ramayana in Southeast Asia and describe the Ramayana dance-drama created by the Indian dancer Rukmini

Devi. Finally, it will illustrate the recent event, the Ramayana Festival in Bangkok, and the Singapore Indian dancers' experience there. This paper will examine how performing arts practices within diasporic spaces highlight relationships and interconnectivity between Singapore Indian dancers and others at the event and how their experiences reflect and fluctuate their identity and belonging (2).

2. The Indian Diasporas and Indian Performing Arts in Singapore

2.1. Indian Migration in Singapore

Situated at the southern end of the Malaysian peninsula as the confluence of trade routes spanning the Indian Ocean, Singapore is a small city-state and a cosmopolitan city with all the trappings of 21st-century modernity. The establishment of Singapore as a free port by the British in the early 19th century determined the ethnic diversity of Singapore. The economic opportunities arising from a port without the unusual tariffs found elsewhere quickly attracted migrants from China, India, the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago, Europe, and other places. By 1827 immigrants from different parts of China became the dominant ethnic group in Singapore, and by the start of the 20th century the ethnic composition of Singapore had stabilized with at least 70 percent of the population being ethnically Chinese, with sizable portions of Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and those of other ethnic backgrounds. Indians are the third-largest racial group in Singapore, after the Chinese and the Malays. While the Indian community forms a small minority of the total population, it has had a significant influence on Singapore's development (Mathews 2018; Rai 2007).

In Singapore today, Vineeta Sinha (2015) argues the description "Indian" carries within its boundaries a myriad of communities—from varied regions, speaking a multitude of languages and adherents of a range of socio-cultural and religious traditions. It also connotes a cultural identity and for some even registers a "national" identity beyond their location in the nation-state of Singapore (Sinha 2018, 191). The term "Indian diaspora," which I use in this paper, includes the early diasporic

Indians who have settled in Singapore since the pre-war days, as well as the new immigrants. From the 19th century onwards, Indians, especially people from South India, began to settle permanently in greater numbers in Singapore, and they have not only established their traditions here but have also assumed greater responsibilities in the economic, political, and cultural development of modern Singapore (3). However, a significant period in the history of the Indian community in Singapore has occurred throughout the past two decades. During that time, a "new" group of Indians from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds accepted the Singapore government's invitation to come to Singapore. This new Indian diaspora comprised mainly service providers and IT personnel and they were able to retain their cultural practices with the support of excellent communication and travel facilities (Kaur 2008; Rai 2015). The older Indian diasporas, already in the third or fourth generation, have through close interaction with them, been reminded, exposed, and brought closer to their traditional practices, attitudes, and way of life. Nevertheless, as Sinha (2018) claims, when taken as a whole, these clusters have changed the social, cultural, and economic makeup of the Indian population as well as its internal political balance (Sinha 2018).

2.-2. The Evolution of Indian Performing Arts in Singapore

In Singapore, Indian culture and traditions have contributed a great deal to building a multicultural society and have even become a symbol of the same. While people from all of India's major ethnolinguistic groups are represented in Singapore, the Tamil community accounts for about 54 % of the country's Indian population. Therefore, the Indian classical music and dance scene in Singapore mostly represents South Indian forms, such as Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam. These are typically associated with Hindu tradition and have been performed at temples during religious festivals since the early 19th century (Takemura 2023, 127).

Indian performing arts were freely viewed by Indian practitioners in public places in the Selegie area long into the 1920s, and Indian dance was initially taught and performed by untrained housewives. In the 1950s, famous dance troupes like Madam Azurie and others visited Singapore on their way to the US, and they performed and occasionally even gave dancing lessons to the locals (Rajan 2008: 636-637). The

period from Singapore's independence to the turn of the century was one of progressive growth in the Indian performing arts scene of the country. As the actions of leaders of this industry and governmental interventions are gradually beginning to pay off, institutions like the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts, and the Temple for Fine Arts—often referred to as the "Big Four"—have solidified their positions, providing vital financial support and momentum to the nascent Indian performing arts scene. SIFAS, a nonprofit Indian organization, had brought in great dancers like Himmath Singh Chauhan to perform and run classes in the 1950s. Later in the 1960s, SIFAS set up a more formal arrangement and joined hands with Kalakshetra, a prominent arts institution, in Chennai, South India. SIFAS follows Kalakshetra's teaching method and syllabus-based curriculum and began to provide training in dance, especially Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music. Today, to strengthen its ties with Kalakshetra, SIFAS not only continues to hire Kalakshetra graduates as teachers but also organize their students' performances in Chennai (Takemura 2023, 127).

Among the dancers who came to Singapore, a few have indeed made it big and contributed immensely toward bringing Indian dance forms certain recognition. As Sykes (2015) claims, no discussion of Indian dance in Singapore is complete without mentioning Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, run by the late Mr. K.P. Bhaskar (1925-2013) and his wife, Santha Bhaskar (1939-2022), who were two of Singapore's first classical Indian dance instructors. Mr. K. P. Bhaskar studied Kathakali in his youth at the Royal College of Dance of Travancore in his native Kerala, with additional training in Kathak, Manipuri, Kandyan (up-country Sri Lankan) dance, and Russian ballet. His gurus included the famous Kathakali dancer Guru Gopinath, Kutralam Ganesam Pillai in the vein of devadasi or "servants of god", and Uday Shankar, with whom he collaborated on the movie "Kalpana" and served as assistant dance director at his Gemini Studio. While making a stopover in Singapore on the way to Australia, he started teaching Bharatanayam in 1952 and soon married the young Malayalee dancer and choreographer Pankyamma Santhamma (later Santha Bhaskar). They set up their dance academy, Bhaskar's Academy of Dance (later called Bhaskar's Arts Academy and the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society).

After performing frequently in their early years, the Bhaskars turned to teaching and choreography. A talented figure in her own right, Mrs. Santha Bhaskar studied Malay, Chinese, and especially Thai dance at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and actively integrated different styles into her works, notably The Butterfly Lovers (1958), inspired by a Chinese folk story (Sykes 2015, 495).

Adding to that, in the 1970s, the Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts, both related to Kalakshetra, gave impetus and standards to the cultural environment. Moreover, several distinguished institutions teach Indian dance and music to local Singaporeans and members of the Indian diasporas at present. The La Salle-SIA College of the Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and the National University of Singapore, the Centre for the Arts, have included Bharatanatyam and Indian music in their curriculum. International Indian schools, such as Global Indian International School and Delhi Public School, are also developing the talent potential of artists. Besides that, some housewives from Chennai, as well as other places like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, whose husbands are IT personnel and service providers, started holding illegal private lessons in their residences. They began to proliferate in the 2000s. As a result, Singapore's Indian performing arts scene appears to be considerably more complex these days (Takemura 2023, 127).

3. Ramayana in Southeast Asia and Indian Dance-Drama

The Ramayana tradition has served as a major source of inspiration for Southeast Asians' artistic expression of their moral, spiritual, and aesthetic standards and ideals through the creation of poetry, prose, mural paintings, relief sculptures, and dramatic performances (Sachithanantham 2004, xiii). Today, there are various forms of telling the story of Rama in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Many national epics were derived from the Ramayana: Ramakien in Thailand, Phra Lak Phra Lam in Laos, and Reamker in Cambodia. This indicates the Ramayana's strong influence over literature in many Southeast Asian countries, as so many different national epics were based on this one story (Sarkar 1983). This multilayered presence of the Ramayana in this region shows a remarkably resilient tradition,

whose continuation depends upon its constant recreation and reinvention. With or without state patronage or social pressure, writers and artists, choreographers, and creators of drama, dance drama, and musical operas have been attracted by the Ramayana and have reinterpreted it through a modern idiom (Vatsyayan 2004, 347). Indeed, Illustrations of the Ramayana can be found in various media and contexts, ranging from temple carvings and manuscript illustrations to masks, puppets, textiles, and, most recently, in film and television, where its popularity continues today (Advani 2014). The Ramayana has been reinterpreted in contemporary Southeast Asian popular culture and the popularity of the Ramayana can be considered an important cultural mediator.

In contrast, most choreographers of the twentieth-century in India have attempted to present ballets based on the Ramayana theme. Among them, Rukmini Devi Arundale, a pioneer dancer from Madras (now Chennai), South India, created one of the most significant landmarks of 20th-century Indian dance. Using tradition and creating new interpretations of tradition, Rukmini Devi, a Brahmin with a liberal Theosophical family background, developed a new dance language to convey the ancient epics. She revived the Sadir, which was almost forgotten and had become marginalized in society, performed by devadasi, and reconstructed it as Bharatanatyam at her institution, Kalakshetra (Meduri 2005; Takemura 2023). Her contribution to lending prestige and dignity to a style that had been banned by the alien rulers is unparalleled, both for its sociocultural and purely artistic facets. It was she who first conceived of presenting dance dramas in the Bharatanatyam style on the modern proscenium stage in the 1940s rather than restricting its repertoire to the typical solo dance of the previous decades. She truly became a living symbol of the renaissance of an ancient art form (Vishwanathan 2010, 175).

As I argued in my recent work (2023), Rukumini never stopped searching for new texts to use as the foundation for her production. According to Vishwanathan (2010), Rukmini's interest in a Ramayana dance drama might have been sparked by what she witnessed when traveling to Indonesia (Vishwanathan 2010). Discussing the production during the 1970 Ramayana Seminar in Indonesia, Rukumini expressed herself in the following words:

> *In my choreography, I have very closely followed the music and have devised movements which are completely musical and express the various shades of meaning which Valmiki conveys in the poetry……also I have varied the movements according to the emotions, according to the type of character, according to the times of the day that are portrayed, and have tried to take into account all the variations of mood expressed by Valmiki* (Vastyayan 2010, 175).

An Indian dance scholar, Kapila Vatsyayan claims Rukumini adopted the rules of directly linking the term to the gesture and rendering the rhythmic passages in pure dance sequences (Vastyayan 2010, 178). Rukmini explained as follows:

> *I wish to make it clear that these dramas produced by me are not dance-dramas handed over from the past. But I have followed the rules of Bharata. I have used only the classical styles and technique; the music is purely classical and in the presentation itself I have tried to keep everything as representative of the age of the Ramayana as possible. I have been true to tradition in my attitude to the production…… in the classicism of the styles of the dances and music used. I fully believe that I have done no violence of any kind to the classical tradition* (Vatsyayan 2010, 178).

For this pioneer, the Ramayana served as the ideal vehicle for refining Bharatanatyam dance-drama for the modern proscenium theater and establishing a definitive paradigm for the genre. Using a corps de ballet to provide moments of exquisite choreography, she certainly brought Bharatanatyam a new perspective to portray the Ramayana. In contrast to Ramayana's previous epic narrative presentation style, she included dramatic climax moments by taking a selectively sensitive approach to the story's important episodes as the iconic text to construct an essential Indianness and defined Indian culture and values

(Vatsyayan 2010, 178). Taken as a whole, the ensuing dance drama is innovative in both vision and technique of execution. Rukumini's works are still being undertaken in Kalakshetra today as a tradition, but their example has inspired Kalakshetra alumni both nationally and globally (Takemura 2023, 130).

4. Performing the Ramayana Tradition at the ASEAN Event and Encounters with Southeast Asia

4.1. ASEAN Plus Ramayana Festival in Bangkok

Since the international Ramayana festivals and seminars were first held in Indonesia in 1971, many more events have provided opportunities for diverse performances and interpretations of the epic in the region. Consequently, the Ramayana has been regarded as a representation of cultural unity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) quest for political and economic unification since 1997. Now, illustrating my latest work (forthcoming), let us exemplify how the Ramayana Festivals serve not only as a contact zone for Singapore Indian dancers to encounter with other Southeast Asian performers but also as an opportunity to reflect their identity.

From April 20-24, 2016, the Ministry of Culture of Thailand organized the "ASEAN Cultural EXPO 2016" with the 234th Year of Rattanakosin City under Royal Benevolence at Sanam Luang and its vicinity in Bangkok. The event aimed to promote the cultural diversity of ASEAN, and the audience could revisit the epic artistry of the Ramayana in a five-day ASEAN Plus Ramayana festival at the National Theatre, with more than 200 performers from around the region, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and India as well. While the Hindu version of the Ramayana was depicted by Indian and Singaporean groups using the Bharatanatyam technique, its shape differed greatly from mainland Southeast Asia, where it shares a common culture with Buddhism. The festivals were memorable for the vibrant quality of their diverse performances.

Mrs. Santha Bhaskar, Singapore's head of delegation and the artistic director of the Bhaskar's Arts Academy, led the ensemble, which included

six female Bharatanatyam dancers, six musicians, including two female vocalists, two mridangams, a flute, and a sitar. They performed a piece based on Hanuman's encounter with Sita, entitled "Ashoka Vati (Ashoka Vanam)," with Bharatanatyam form and live Carnatic music. The story was about Sita seated under the Ashoka tree lamenting (using slokas or verses from the original Ramayana by Valmiki) her condition. Her disappointment and deep sorrow force her to attempt suicide. However, Hanuman stops her in her attempt and shows Rama's ring to her. This causes Sita to have second thoughts and change her mind, and she sends her hair jewelry to Rama. Hanuman goes back to Rama singing that he has found Sita. Rama travels to Lanka and crosses the bridge built by Hanuman and his friend. Mrs. Santha Bhaskar described her creative intention of the production as that she wanted to express the uniqueness of Singapore through a different approach from the conventional Indian Ramayana dance-drama productions such as Kalakshetra style (6). She explained in a Thai TV interview, "we are not having Rama and Hanuman in all costumes like other countries come up with costumes. Dancers will be wearing the usual costumes, but they will dance like characters. So, we have more dance rather than acting" (7). Unlike Kalakshetra's tradition, the troupe's Bharatanatyam based production was unique in that, as a new experiment, all the roles were performed by female dancers, and their choreography alone—without the need of special costumes—was used to portray Hanuman and Rama. Especially, the group emphasized choreography and motions above gestures and narrative in a dance-drama manner (Takemura 2025).

During my fieldwork in Singapore in August 2017, I spoke with Mrs. Santha Bhaskar and the dancers from Bhaskar's Arts Academy who performed at the event in Bangkok regarding Ramayana and their experiences. According to Mrs. Santha Bhaskar, she has been drawn to the Ramayana story ever since she had to create a new production in the 1960's. "It is really a human story that imparts a lot of everyday wisdom," she explained. In contrast to her generation, she is concerned that the dancers in her group do not know much about the story and have not even read the Ramayana. Even though Singapore now has new interpretations of the Ramayana in English in the form of novels, comics, and DVDs, these young dancers do not show any interest in it. She claims, "I believe their parents also do not know much about the

Ramayana. If their parents do not teach the traditions to their children, how can I blame our dancers?" On the contrary, she mentioned that the new Indian diasporas, who have been coming to Singapore since the 1990s, are keen on maintaining their traditions and make sure that their children learn it properly. They often ask her about books and websites related to Hindu mythology and the epic (8). In other words, the degree of enjoyment of the Ramayana can be seen in multiple phases among the Indian diasporas.

In Singapore, the Ramayana was considered a religious subject and was never taught at schools in the past. However, over the last two decades, the government has reconsidered the Ramayana as an important cultural legacy, and they are keen to make it a national heritage. The government, through its affiliated agencies, has organized several relevant events and activities; the exhibition of "Ramayana: A Living Tradition" at the Asian Civilizations Museum in 1997, the exhibition of "Ramayana: A Tale of Love and Adventure" at the Peranakan Museum in 2010, the video projection of "The Legend of Ramayana" at the National Museum of Singapore's Banyan Tree during Singapore Night Festival 2019 and so on. In addition, Bhaskar's Arts Academy presents Kathakali and other Bharatanatyam repertoires based on the Ramayana story at schools as part of the Arts Education Program (Takemura 2023). Mrs. Santha Bhaskar emphasizes, "The arts help children realize their identity. It is important to know the great wealth of values passed on from generation to generation" (9). It can be presumed that new generations of Singaporeans may have a basic knowledge of the Ramayana soon.

4.2. Encounter with Southeast Asia and Ambivalence towards "Indianness"

Regarding the Ramayana event in Bangkok, Mrs. Santha Bhaskar stated, "There was an excellent crowd: for dancers, it's always a pleasure to perform in front of a crowd that knows the epic and myths" (10). The main dancer of the troupe, a second-generation Singapore Indian in her mid 40's, is concerned that the young dancers might not properly understand the Ramayana. She agrees that those dancers are more familiar with the Ramayana than others of Indian descent in Singapore. How-

ever, she made the point that there is a significant distinction between "knowing" and "understanding" the Ramayana's characters. Without a doubt, performing the Ramayana on a stage does not necessarily mean understanding the epic (11). In that case, what experience did the young Singapore Indian dancers, who showed no interest in the Ramayana, gain by performing the Ramayana at the ASEAN event in Bangkok?

One of the dancers, a third-generation Singapore Indian in her mid 20's, described her experience in Bangkok, saying:

> *Bangkok was completely different from India. It was quite an enjoyable moment…... We went to India to perform our productions at the International Ramayana Festival in 2015…… Over there, they did not treat us nicely…… They treated us like not proper Indian dancers…… The venue was terrible in many senses, and they seemed not to care at all……. I, personally could not fit into the environment and really felt I am not that Indian, I am Singaporean* (12).

Going over her recollections of the event, she described her experience in Bangkok as more enriching than that in India, where she had been less than impressed with the local Indian representatives and their hospitality with no respect. In Bangkok, on the other hand, her troupe met with a generous reception in a venue well-furnished with modern equipment. She emphasized the warm hospitality she received there made her feel she was at home in one of her fellow Southeast Asian countries. Performing the Ramayana in India and Thailand sharpened her sense of her own identity and belonging. This young dancer's experiences did not necessarily strengthen her identification as an Indian, but it was an element that reaffirmed her identity as a Singaporean.

The other dancer, third-generation Singapore Indian in her late 20's, stated her feelings about the event and her encounters with other dancers in Bangkok with these words:

> *I enjoyed being there. There were different kinds of dance*

> *repertoire based on the Ramayana…… We do not have that kind of choreography and body movements in our Bharatanatyam…...They (Thai and Cambodian dancers) came and talked to me after the performance, and they told me they liked our production. ……They said, our choreography was completely original and unique. They have great respect for Indian culture, and they seem to have more sympathy with us rather than dancers from India……I kind of felt that I am proud of what I learned, Indian dance, and quite happy that what we performed was not the same as dancers from India. Because I never felt I am 'Indian' although I learned Bharatanatyam"* (13).

While she had learned Bharatanatyam in her childhood and her family has been deeply involved in the Indian performing arts scene in Singapore over the decades, she always considers herself Singaporean; any sense of "Indianness" was irrelevant. Even though she had performed many Ramayana productions, she had never cared to learn more about the story in detail, something I noted in other young dancers. Ramayana tells us about duty and honor, loyalty, behaving dutifully to their family, good and evil, love and loss, jealousy, and destructive ambitions. In fact, many parts of the story, especially the relationship between men and women with traditional Indian values, do not resonate with the newer generation of Singapore Indians who were nurtured in a contemporary, cosmopolitan culture (14). However, when Southeast Asian dancers shared their feelings with her and acknowledged Indian culture, she felt confused about her identity and began to wonder about her own "Indianness." The Thai and Laotian artists commended Singapore Indian dancers for their distinctive staging and Indian elegance of style, which embody both Singaporean and Indian ideals. Her identity and thought process are undoubtedly rooted in Singapore, but perhaps performing the Ramayana at the ASEAN event had somehow made her more open to "Indianness", albeit in a fragile way, and tenuously. Having mentioned the global circulation of Indian dance, O'Shea (2007) argues that identification must be deliberately developed, even if not necessarily explicitly, rather than emerging naturally from shared national, linguistic, or ethnic roots or from participation in group activities (O'shea 2007, 145-56). By Performing the Ramayana in the

global content and interacting with non-Indian dancers from Southeast Asia, Singapore Indian dancers are confronted with the cultural gyre of the Ramayana, which contains Indian norms, values, and aesthetics, and those experiences make them fluctuate and reinforce their identity and belonging.

5. Conclusion

Against the background of economic globalization and the penetration of new information technology, contemporary Indian cultures are undergoing a radical transformation, resonating with similar changes in other parts of the world. In Singapore today, the accomplishments of Indian performing arts are becoming more widely known and accepted as part of national heritage. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on Indian performing arts by illustrating India's epic tradition, the Ramayana, and its festivals in Southeast Asia.

The Indian community's experience of Singapore's multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual landscape has allowed the community to remain committed to its own socio-cultural and religious leanings. The production of a Singaporean national identity has neither subsumed nor marginalized an ethnic Indian Identity (Sinha 2018, 191). However, as this paper has exemplified, the newer generation of Singapore Indians seem not necessarily to have kept their traditions strongly. They did not have an opportunity to learn the story of Ramayana and its values. More importantly, they have not bothered about it. They "know" what the Ramayana is about through their performance. The experience of Bhaskar's dancers performing on stage at the Ramayana festival in Bangkok does not conceal a prior identity; rather, it is the performance and experience that shape their identity. It is precisely because of this that their identity is fluctuating.

Singapore's national and ethnic identities are closely intertwined; a crucial component is the distinctive fusion and interplay of the country's primary ethnic identities. Prime minister Lee Hsien Loong put it in his speech at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Center in 2017, "Today we are a modern and developed society, but remain

rooted in our Asian culture. This sense of rootedness gives us a sense of identity and confidence. we are also a multiracial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society. This diversity is a fundamental aspect of our respective identities" (15). As demonstrated by Prime Minister Lee's speech and the official presentation of ethnic culture in Singapore, it is anticipated that ethnic culture would remain an essential part of Singaporean identity. The Singaporean government acknowledges that a national identity cannot simply replace racial, religious, and linguistic identities, and it hasn't attempted to do so. However, Mr. Chan Chun Sing, Minister of Social and Family Development in Singapore, stated in a public speech in 2014 that identity was not just about the past, but also about their common future. He explained that the Singaporean identity was difficult to define based on a shared past as many in the population have different roots, grew up in different environments, and speak different languages. Instead, he insisted the Singaporean identity should be based on a common future. While it may be difficult to describe a common future among the Indian diasporas as Singaporean, it is certain that these Singapore Indian dancers have managed, through performing the Ramayana, to find their "Indianness" or "belonging" as Singaporeans of their era. The phenomenon of globalization is a reality that permeates everyday life and places, in which the individual is the protagonist. It is none other than the individual who experiences it, interprets its meanings and value, and negotiates it boundaries.

Notes

(1) diaspora studies

(2) The data I used in this paper are interviews, archives, and online materials I have amassed from 2017 to 2025.

(3) The prewar Indian diaspora mainly comprised a labor force, whereas the postwar one included medical, legal, teaching, and administrative professionals. Then followed a waning trend of immigration from the 1960s to the 1980s (Sandhu 1993).

(4) This significantly enhanced the excitement that young girls had exhibited for this creative form. Though small in magni-

tude, the impact of these artists was powerful as they raised the standard of performance and public expectations in Singapore in the 1960s (Rajan 2008, 636-637).

(5) see as example in FUkuok 2023

(6) Interview with Mrs. Santha Bhaskar, August 25, 2017.

(7) NBT WORLD, ASEAN Plus Ramayana, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urQamHkF4NE, accessed July 20, 2017.

(8) Interview with Mrs. Santha Bhaskar, August 25, 2017.

(9) ibid.

(10) ibid.

(11) Interview with T.A., August 26, 2017.

(12) Interview with R. S., August 26, 2017.

(13) Interview with B. M., August 26, 2017.

(14) As Tiwari (2020) argues that the portrayal of the female characters in the epic is startling to our modern sensibilities, for they are displayed as submissive and obedient wives, mothers, and daughters, who lack minds of their own and are thus entirely dictated to by the male characters.

(15) Prime Minister's Office Singapore, "PM Lee Hsien Loong spoke about Singaporean Chinese culture and the Singaporean identity at the official opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre on 19 May 2017.", May 19, 2017. https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-official-opening-singapore-chinese-cultural-centre, accessed April 20, 2025.

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