Viewing the Indian dance scene over the past quarter century, one can see a seismic shift in the role of the man in dance. It once seemed that every Indian boy was headed for a career in engineering, medicine, law or business. Dance? Indian parents would forbid such an unstable and unrespectable pursuit for their treasured sons.

In those days, Prof. C.V. Chandrasekhar, holder of advanced degrees in Botany, was Dean of the Music College at MS University, Vadodara. And after his full day of teaching and administrative duties, he would retire to his bungalow, bikes would appear out of the darkness, dancers would change from their work-day clothes and into practice garb, and for the next 2 or 3 hours, brilliant choreographies would emerge. He was ably and devotedly supported by his wife, Jaya. However, he was far from the limelight. Even in nearby Ahmedabad, his work was relatively ignored.

In Lucknow, Arjun Misra was busy training dozens of students, almost all girls with the notable exception of his son Anuj and a few others. Arjun’s performing career was stuck in relative obscurity. Similarly, Sasidharan Nair was known as the partner of Mallika Sarabhai, not as a soloist despite his truly masterful Kathakali. A handful of other outstanding men including V.P. Dhananjayan, Astaad Deboo and Vithal Pasumarthy had achieved high levels of expertise in their respective forms,
and were fighting against the tide, devoted to their craft but playing second fiddle to women in the field. Maulik Shah and Rajendra, though talented Kathak dancers, were known as half of a partnership with their wives Ishira and Nirupama.

In 1993, I organized the U.S. debut tour by Chandrasekhar and his troupe. Only afterwards was he accorded the attention he had long deserved in India—a national Sangeet Natak Akademi award. But a return to Vadodara and an exhausting academic career awaited him—not the national stages that he deserved, which would only come much later.

In 1995, I sat with Anita Ratnam in New York and discussed the plight of the male dancer, a genus that seemed close to extinction. We decided to collaborate on a production that would bring men forward, highlighting the strength, virility and craft of the man in dance. PURUSH: Expressions of Man was the result and performances at the Music Academy in Chennai, Lincoln Center in New York and an extensive national American tour reaped adulation from audiences and critics alike. Afterwards, however, the dancers returned to relative obscurity.

Fast forward to the present time: the younger generation of male dancers is attracting frequent and flashy attention in the media as well as regional and national awards across India. Clearly, the scenario is entirely different even in the Indian diaspora, particularly in Malaysia (Ramli Ibrahim, Ajith Bhaskar Dass, Parveen Nair, Lawrence Sakris), South Africa (Sarveshan Kumar, Manesh Maharaj) and most of all, the U.K., where Aakash Odedra and Akram Khan are worldwide celebrities.

As male dancers reach maturity, some are seeking social impact beyond the stage to complement their artistry. Unnath Hassan Rathnaraju convinced his parents to allow him to pursue his passion in dance only after a 3-day fast at the age of seven. Now in his early 30’s and after scoring success as a performer across the Indian metros and in the U.S. and Sri Lanka with my own Battery Dance, he decided to focus his attention on his home town of Hassan. A few months ago, he inaugurated a magnificent dance center there. With a bevy of students, male and female, he has been inspired to address the lack of access to the art of dance in a city that was once a cultural hub and which seems to have largely forgotten its illustrious past. He has built a spacious dance studio with sprung wooden floors, natural light and ventilation, with another studio and a performing arts library in the works on upper floors. His family gave up their garden to make way for his vision and the community is rallying after initial skepticism.

Mithun Shyam, a charismatic performer, has developed his own pedagogy in Bangalore, with devoted students, some with disabilities that dancing helps them to overcome. Not entirely satisfied with the mix of performing and teaching, he has also launched the magazine in which this essay appears. This kind of generosity of spirit—to broaden the outreach of the art form he loves—signals an evolution of vision that one hopes will catch fire across the Subcontinent.

The combination of technical expertise and artistry with devotion to training and inspiring youngsters is abundantly present in many other male dancers including but not by any means limited to those whose work I have been following such as Rakesh and Rajesh Sai Babu, Shanmugha Sundaram, Pavitra Bhat, Kishore Mosalikanti, Vasanth Kiran, Anuj Misra, Parshwanath Upadhye, Suhail Bhan and Christopher Gurusamy who recently won the attention and appreciation of the New York Times Chief Dance Critic-Alastair Macaulay. Outstanding performers such as Avijit Das, Rahul Acharya and Haleem Khan are fighting taboos with their dizzying virtuosity; and the strikingly talented Shyamjith Kiran and Shijith Nambiar complement their life and stage partners Viraja and Parvati. Sanjib Bhattacharya carries on the heritage of Guru Bipin Singh and the divine Jhaveri Sisters in the frame of Manipuri dance in Delhi and around the world. The exquisitely pure Kathak of Sandip Mallick and his student Megh Ayan Banerjee, the Uday Shankar influenced stylizations of Arkadev Bhattacharya, Jaydeep Palit and Arnab Bandyopadhyay; the Gaudiya Nritya torch bearing of Washim Raja; and the contemporary creations and entrepreneurship of Sudarshan Chakravorty point to the fact that Kolkata is a fallow ground for male dancers.'

Here in the U.S., SaiSanthosh Radhakrishnan has chosen a different path altogether. A scintillating Bharatanatyam artist, he has taken a Masters Degree in Sustainability Management
at the prestigious Columbia University while finding time to perform with the likes of Leela Samson and his brilliant colleague Bhavajan Kumar, rehearsing at midnight and waking at 7 – a practice he learnt in Chennai when he started balancing a life with diverse devotions. Kuldeep Singh is a nuanced artist who is combining intensive study and performance of Odissi with his oeuvre as an acclaimed multi-media artist. Dancer turned entrepreneur Sridhar Shanmugam has taken his well-trained eye and undying passion for Indian dance into the realm of producing, co-creating his own non-profit institution which teaches and promotes the careers of dancers and musicians.

Sujit Vaidya, Harikishan Nair and Hari Krishnan ply their outstanding artistic trades in Canada; Sooraj Subramanian and Tom DeKuyper in Belgium; Revanta Sarabhai in Holland, researching new themes, classical, contemporary and folk, and developing new audiences for Indian dance. Beyond mere proficiency, these artists have honed their craft to a fine finish. Certainly they have met with difficulties and have been considered oddities by many; but their hearts beat to the Indian drum and no challenges are too great, including cold climates and financial hardship.

The barriers that once haunted male dancers remain – sexual innuendos and slurs by a conservative society; the need to take up a stable, financially lucrative and prestigious career; the responsibility to raise a family when dancing requires frequent absences for touring and long hours of rehearsal – but the determination of the men cited in this essay and many others is a harbinger that gender equality in dance is on the way.

Battery Dance will perform in Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi in January, 2018, on a tour sponsored by ICCR and the US Embassy.

For more details please visit: www.batterydance.org

Jonathan Hollander is the Director of Battery Dance Company in New York, USA. He has been instrumental in taking dance to the underprivileged and downtrodden sectors of society across the world with his much appreciated ‘Dance to Connect’ project. He is the co-organiser of the much sought after Battery Dance Festival in NYC and is an inspiration to many an artiste.

Dancers: Clockwise from top left
Mithun Shyam - Photo by V B Suresh, Kuldeep Singh Odissi, Sooraj Subramaniam photo by Daniel Sneed, Vithal Pasumarthy, Kuchipudi Dancer who participated in PURUSH Expressions of Man, 1995