



# Dancing Truth to Power

by **DIVYA THOMAS** /// EAC Volunteer

Seshakamal has choreographed numerous performances.

PHOTO: Amar Khoday

## TAKE ACTION

Support artistic communities in your area. Watch the film *The Railway Men* depicting the untold story of Bhopal. Acknowledge that the impact of colonialism and capitalism are integral to understanding climate justice. Make efforts to decolonize the way you engage in climate action.

“Bharata Natyam is a vibrant Indian classical dance style. It is believed to be over 4,000 years old. It was originally a temple dance performed for worship. It involves intricate footwork along with an extensive vocabulary of eye, neck and head movements and hand gestures. In addition to the complex technical aspect, there is an expressive and storytelling component. Once a form of worship, now Bharata Natyam is an art form that can educate and entertain new audiences, seasoned artists and dance enthusiasts alike,” says Seshakamal Iyengar.

Seshakamal is a professional Bharata Natyam dancer with over 35 years of experience. He began his tutelage in Bharata Natyam at the age of nine years old and completed his arangetram (graduation) in 1991. In Montreal, he runs his own school, Swara Kamalam, where he teaches the Mysuru style of Veena and the Pandanallur style of Bharata Natyam. Swara Kamalam also funds a dance scholarship in India, the Srinivasa Smrithi, given to underprivileged children who excel in the field of Bharata Natyam in collaboration with the Nrutya Bhushana Dance Festival of Mysuru, India.

Seshakamal tells stories about current issues, such as climate change, through this 4,000-year-old artform. He has authored and choreographed numerous performances on climate change and social issues. His key past performances include portrayals of the Bhopal Disaster, Black July and the Indian famines.

## The world's worst industrial disaster

The **Bhopal gas tragedy** is known as the world's worst industrial disaster.

“This year marks 40 years since the explosion occurred. The people of Bhopal continue to suffer generational impacts,” says Seshakamal.

Seshakamal represented the poisonous gas while dancing the truth of the 1984 Union Carbide pesticide plant explosion in Bhopal, India. The performance concluded with a representation of a seed failing to blossom in the contaminated soil.

The explosion killed 20,000 people, seriously injured 10,000 people, and disabled 20,000 people. The waterbed in Bhopal is still contaminated with over 20 known carcinogens since Dow chemicals, the owner of Union Carbide, has failed to clean the chemicals. This environmental disaster amplifies the need to protect communities in the global south from negligence, dumping and dangerous industrial projects from multinational corporations.

## Black July

Last year marked 40 years since the Black July pogrom (1983), an organized massacre on Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Seshakamal authored and choreographed a Bharata Natyam performance depicting three women's experiences of Black July.

“I wanted to portray how conflict disproportionately impacts women and girls,” says Seshakamal.

He wrote three historical fictions based on Black July. The first depicted a mother whose husband and child are taken. The second portrayed a 10-year-old girl walking to school. When she returns from school, she learns that her parents were murdered by a bomb. The third told the story of a college-aged girl waiting for her friend at the bus stop, but her friend never made it.

Seshakamal's work demonstrates that the vocabulary of Bharata Natyam is versatile enough to tell all stories. He is dancing truth to power, sharing knowledge of important events, teaching younger generations and inspiring action through performance.

**Divya** (she/her) holds a BA (hons) in political science and sustainability and a Master of Public Administration. She enjoys writing stories and poetry that explore identity and diasporic experiences.