

## **Bharatanatyam - Random Thoughts...**

by Mythili Kumar

Having been associated with **performing and teaching Bharatanatyam for over thirty-five years**, I find it interesting to reflect on the many facets of Bharatanatyam that have made such a difference in my life and have inspired me to cling to this art form for so long. In retrospect, I must confess that this was not a conscious choice on my part. Like many students of Bharatanatyam in the U.S., I was pursuing an academic career and envisioned a career as a research scientist, even though I had danced professionally through my college years in India. However, having settled into a contented married life, it was inevitable that my role as an artist was superceded by that of a home-maker. My family needs came first and it was easier to slip into establishing a dance school with its flexible scheduling than to pursue a career in nutrition research. After twenty-one years of teaching a varied and highly diverse group of children and adults and managing a successful non-profit organization devoted exclusively to Indian dance, **I now wonder where Bharatanatyam is headed in the U.S.?** Will it ever become part of the mainstream culture? Does it need to become part of the mainstream culture at all? Is it as popular as it was over twenty years ago? Do we need to change its format to make it more accessible to all audiences? Are we blindly adhering to tradition without being cognizant of the changes around us - in families, in beliefs, and in traditional values? The questions are innumerable and I wish I had all the answers. What I can only do is share my experience with you.

When I first came here years ago and met other Indians settled here, their first remark when they learned that I was a Bharatanatyam dancer would be, **“Wow! So, can you do the snake dance?”** We have seen Kumari Kamala do it a long time ago and we would love to see it again.” I would be quietly disdainful of their knowledge of Bharatanatyam, since the days of performing the snake dance was a thing of the past - the only dancer who was doing it then was the athletically trained Svarnamukhi, an exception since she could twist her body into many of the seemingly impossible 108 poses of Lord Shiva. The Bharatanatyam I had been performing was chaste - drawn from the Pandanallur style, with traditional varnams, padams and javalis and the occasional kriti, and snake dances and kurathi dances had been eschewed from the repertoire. The Indian community settled here at that time knew little of the Bharatanatyam presented in India. Most of the young women, who had come here either as young wives or to pursue graduate studies, had little time to attend or even learn the art. But one thing was certain - they all wanted their daughters to learn the art form. By this choice, they were vicariously fulfilling their own dreams. Bharatanatyam, though popular in many cities, was an expensive hobby to learn or to ascend the stage as a performer. I can still hear my mother remonstrating with my father for spending so much money on my dance instead of saving up for my marriage. I was one of six children and, looking back, I am surprised that I got the opportunity to pursue it to the extent I did. My father pursued my training and career with single-minded passion and fervor, since he believed (and still believes) that I will make headlines in the global world of dance!

Thus, during the early eighties, the majority of Indians had their daughters in dance classes regardless of the girls' choice or talent. The dance class was a place where, in addition to learning the art, the students could form playgroups, have **sleepover sessions with a token dance practice thrown in**, and finally also imbibe some traditional Indian values and be connected to Indian culture. The dance class also kept them sheltered from the overwhelming influences of the pop culture. A decade later, with a younger generation of parents who are less restrictive and more aware of the myriad choices available to the children, dance class was a choice in addition to involvement in soccer, tennis, swimming, music, piano, etc. etc. To be competitive for admission to college amongst other high-achieving students, the dance students aimed at achieving proficiency in more than just dance. The past five years has seen this craving grow among students and parents and has become so widespread that students are stretched thin by the demands made on them. Since Bharatanatyam requires total dedication, arduous hours of practice, and an all consuming passion for perfection, the students' interest is evident only until the arangetram is performed at which point it can be listed as a singular achievement on the student's application record. Thereafter only an abysmal minority of students returns to regular classes or shows an interest in delving deeper into the mythology and intricacies of the dance. Can this be changed or should we live with the reality of the situation and be content that they are at least getting exposed to this ancient art? The Indian community has no doubt become more educated over the years through the number of dance productions they have witnessed in the area, and the number of dance teachers and dance schools that have sprouted here since the 1990s. They are more aware of the trends in Bharatanatyam, they can recognize differences in quality, and the audience for dance has grown immensely. Therefore the important consideration now should be maintaining high standards and quality in performing and teaching. Can this be done if the current dance student goes through a brief and superficial training process that ends with the arangetram?

Obviously, all who join the dance class cannot become wonderful exponents of this difficult art. The Abhinaya Darpana has a sloka that describes Patra Prana Dasha Smrutaha - the ten essentials of the dancer: **Javaha** (Agility), **Sthirathvam** (Steadiness), **Rekhacha** (graceful lines), **Bhramari** (balance in pirouettes), **Drishtir** (glance), **Shramaha** (hard work), **Medha** (intelligence), **Shraddha** (devotion), **Vacho** (good speech), and **Geetam** (singing ability).. A formidable list indeed - though some of these need not be innate qualities but can possibly be developed over the course of the training if the student is committed and dedicated. And only a performer with many of these qualities can aim to create in the audience and herself/himself the elusive 'Rasa' – aesthetic pleasure or delight touted as the ultimate goal of all Indian arts. So should we as teachers desist from enrolling students unless they meet these criteria? Most certainly not. For the point of the training that is offered to all students, irrespective of talent, is to inculcate in the student the physical discipline that this art aims for: to teach varied body movements that develop muscle flexibility at the crucial growing age; to imbibe the fundamentals of Indian rhythm that is common to all Indian music and dance; to gain familiarity with a unique language of gestures and interpretative vocabulary; and to absorb the stories of Hindu and Indian mythology through the themes of the basic

repertoire as well as by attending as many recitals as possible. In essence, if the dance student who does not become a performer instead becomes a great connoisseur of the art, we would have achieved our goal of propagating this dance form and ensured its longevity for successive generations. What I have said above should answer every parent's query and concern about whether their child is learning an art that, if not performed by them in the future, will be of any use at all. While we, the teachers, strive to impart the little knowledge we have gleaned from this vast ocean, we would derive great pride and enjoyment if the student built upon that and reached great heights on their own as well. On the other hand, if this becomes only a line item in the student's resume, we hope that the student, realizing that she/he has a responsibility to uphold the quality of the art, ascends the performing platform only when she/he is ready to do justice to the exacting nature of the dance.

Can Indian dancing be a viable career for anyone here in the U.S.? It is interesting that, out of over 50 dancers who performed their solo debuts or arangetrams under Abhinaya, only one actually even considered this as an option. She was torn between a career in medicine which would have been her family's choice given her impeccable academic qualifications, and her passion for dance. Even I who have chosen a dance career could not justify her choosing dance, due to the impossibility of guaranteeing financial self-sufficiency. I have known of an Odissi dancer who in the early 80's was cleaning homes for a living to sustain her performing and augment her meager teaching income. The ever increasing Indian immigrant population also brings a fair share of new teachers and performers and unless a dancer moves to new towns and cultivates other Indian communities, the opportunities for teaching and performing continue to be limited and discourage this as a viable career.

With respect to the format and content, my opinion is that it is only by adhering to the traditional format during the entire training process that one can impart the fundamentals of the art. This is true even for the non-Hindu student, a minority in many dance schools. The technique of nritta (abstract rhythmic dance) has no specific religious connotations - it can remain at the physical level. However, traditional **Nritya** (interpretative dance) is based on Hindu imagery. This should still be used as a means of learning the fundamentals of **expressional dance without espousing or thrusting Hindu religious beliefs on the non-Hindu student**. After the training, the student is free to make his or her choice of theme or piece. While different themes, group presentations, and new ideas are constantly being presented, the traditional pieces never lose their charm. To present a traditional piece with technical perfection from start to finish, render it with maximum energy, project one's total involvement in the piece and show mastery of the style is a difficult task to accomplish and can be a lifelong challenge. Therefore the only way one can hope to attract audiences from the innumerable distractions of films, popular music, and other competing events, is to present our best performances with consistent quality and sincerity.

**What is the future of Bharatanatyam - will it metamorphose to Bhangranatyam?** In colleges all over the country, there is a vast resurgence of popular Indian dances

primarily modeled after hit songs in the films. Dances set to fast-paced folk songs, Gujarati garba, and the Punjabi bhangra are commonly performed at social gatherings for young college undergraduates. The annual India culture show in many universities may also have a short Bharatanatyam presentation. Just as in the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, only 5-10 minutes are given to present this classical dance, which in contrast is slower and more contemplative in nature. Only the swift Thillana-like pieces with quick changing stage formations find a place in these recitals. Dancers trained in different schools and differing widely in the quality of training come together to put this spectacle. My hope is that even while performing on par with all the other easily attainable casual dance styles, the proponents of Bharatanatyam will realize its intrinsic value and portray it with sincerity and dedication to technical perfection, and that the dance does not become a diluted version devoid of its glory and majesty.

Even though Bharatanatyam has been established here in the Bay Area for so long, the mainstream population is barely aware of the number of performances that are presented here. **One major problem is the general media.** When reading the daily newspapers, you will notice that we are inundated with information about numerous events of the ballet, the symphony, Western classical music quartets, opera, theatre, pop musical extravaganzas, sports events, and community events - only occasionally do we see Indian events drawing some publicity. Only our trusted Indian newspapers publicize the innumerable classical, community and religious events that the Bay Area Indian community is involved in. Although there have been groups lobbying the local non-Indian newspapers for several years, changes in newspaper personnel usually means the lobbying has to begin afresh. Only if letters protesting this state of affairs are written to the newspapers by concerned audience members can we artists hope to get the free publicity that will allow us to reach a mainstream audience. The vastly differing quality of Indian performances and events also does not help newspaper reviewers in their decision of the events to attend. Many of these issues have to be addressed by artists and our communities if we wish to entrench the Indian dance scene in the mainstream art-loving audience in the future.

Of the seven Indian classical dance styles, Bharatanatyam is definitely established in the U.S. I hope that the immense richness of all our dance forms will continue to enrich the lives of people in the US, help us forget our mundane worries, and slowly and surely transform us to that state where we can experience Rasa.