

# **TEACHING INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**

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That Indian classical dance exists outside India is not in question. What is of interest is to examine the extent to which it does and the special challenges and constraints imposed on it due to the interaction of other cultures. As the title suggests, the aim of the paper is to present an analysis of Indian classical dance as it exists outside the country of origin, with special reference to its preservation through teaching and performing.

There are various dance related activities through which Indian classical dance forms have been exposed and propagated outside India. Promotion and sponsorship of renowned dancers from India to give performances, workshops, lecture-demonstrations etc. is one. Cross-cultural dance activities in some countries such as Canada have also provided opportunities to Indian classical dance exponents to share the platform with practitioners of other dance styles in such forums as Dance in Canada Conferences, Salon de la Danse, Ateliers de Chorégraphies, etc. There is also evidence of some interest in Indian dance from a purely academic or research point of view at various universities in the Departments of Religious Studies, Asian Studies and Dance.

A significant activity, the impact of which is being felt more and more, is the teaching of different Indian classical styles by dancers who have settled outside India. The present paper deals with this aspect and is based essentially on my personal experience as a dance teacher at Kala Bharati in Montreal, Canada.

## **CONTEXT OF THE TEACHING SITUATION**

Before going on to describing the approaches and methodology that are being adopted to teach Indian classical dance, more specifically Bharata Natya, I would like to delineate the context of the situation under which this

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activity is being carried out. The preservation and promotion of dance or any other form of art that reflects a particular culture, involve three groups of participants - the teacher/promoter through whose initiative and efforts the dance activities are carried out, the students who are the direct recipients of this activity and take an active part in it and the audience who indirectly participate and share in the activities.

### **The Teacher**

The teacher's role in the context of a traditional art such as Bharata Natya, is partly to serve as a conduit through whom the tradition is passed on. When the art is practised in the cultural environment of its origin the role of the teacher is easily adopted. The tradition itself is not questioned and the teacher and the taught assume well-defined role patterns.

Another role for the teacher is to inspire the students so as to encourage them to pursue the art and also to propel them to a higher plane of achievement. There again the task is made easier when carried out in the original cultural milieu because of the positive and sustaining input from the surrounding cultural environment. Inspiration often comes from innovative teaching techniques and exposure to excellence in the art. In the country of origin, even if the teacher himself or herself is handicapped to provide these, it is nonetheless compensated by the contribution to the field of dance by other teachers and performers.

In teaching the art outside the country of origin both of the above roles pose formidable challenges. In the role of conduit, even if the teacher is well qualified and fully equipped to meet the rigors of imparting dance training, the student may not be inclined to readily accept the traditional teaching methods. It is then necessary to adapt the methodology to suit the context.

The role in which the teacher acts as a source of inspiration is even more demanding because the opportunities for providing exposure to excellence in the art being taught are somewhat limited. The task of imparting training in Indian classical dance outside India is thus a formidable one indeed. Yet it is not uncommon to find exponents of this art in various cities of North America who have taken up this challenge and with some notable results as reviewed by Sunil Kothari in his article "Expatriate Dancers' Disciples" (Economic Times, New Delhi, December 14, 1986).

A profile of a typical teacher of Indian dance outside India will not be out of place here. In most cases the dance teacher is likely to be a female. She has probably received good training in India and has performed there as well. She has been transplanted to the West either through migration of the family or by marriage to someone settled abroad. Rare would be the case where a teacher has actually settled outside India with a mission to teach dance.

It seems safe to say that teachers of Indian classical dance working outside India are not trained to teach dance but have chanced on teaching through a process of personal and artistic growth and development.

By contrast, the traditional guru in India is usually a male who has learnt the art at the feet of a master, very likely a member of the family. He is meticulously groomed. Along with dance itself, he is trained in the art of choreography and the conducting of dance recitals. It is on the shoulders of such gurus that the mantle is laid to carry on and uphold the traditions and styles of a particular lineage. It is true that the dance scene in India is undergoing evolutionary changes and many of the younger dance teachers do not conform to the image of the traditional guru, but nevertheless dance teaching in India is still very much in the hands of the latter.

The reason for pointing out these differences is to underline the fact that these teachers, operating a world apart, belong to different genres and that this fact is bound to influence their *modus operandi* just as much as would their different objectives, needs and constraints.

### **The Students**

The clientèle of the Indian dance teacher in the West is a heterogeneous grouping of students who differ widely in their backgrounds and objectives.

A large number of them are of Indian parentage. These students, when very young, often join these classes due to the persistent prodding by their parents. In such cases the reasons for learning Indian dance range from getting an exposure to Indian culture and heritage to being engaged in activities that parents consider "good", and other similar reasons. Teaching and performing are carried out on a community level with a distinct emphasis on the ethnocultural element.

Students who do not belong to this category i.e. who do not have Indian parentage and who are loosely called "Westerners", come to learn for entirely different reasons. They are often prompted by an interest in Indian culture and philosophy and sometimes by an interest in dance as a form of art which enriches their personal artistic pursuit. In this latter category we have had a wide variety of students, from a film maker who decided to take some lessons because he had planned to make a film on an Indian dancer, to a ballet dancer who needed Indian dance movements for a particular choreography she was involved in.

A third and more challenging as well as interesting group is that of dance students who intend to take up Indian classical dance as a profession. For teachers and teaching institutions outside India, this is a rare privilege

and I find it very gratifying that at Kala Bharati there are a few training towards this goal along with one professional dancer, Jai Govinda (né Benoît Villeneuve), who has already attained this objective. Jai Govinda who has trained in Bharata Natya entirely at Kala Bharati in Montreal, has become a professional dancer and has won high acclaim by connaisseurs both in North America and India. I would like to add that for many teaching institutions outside India, this is not as common an occurrence as it should be. In some quarters a mistaken belief and perception still persists that in order to learn Indian classical dance to a high level of proficiency, one absolutely has to train in India. From my personal knowledge of the kind of work that is being done in several North American cities, I can say with some conviction that this notion is not always well founded. However, in situations where qualified teachers are not available locally, it is understandable that students interested in learning Indian dance decide to go to India in the hope of studying the art at the source. Unfortunately for such students, adding to the innumerable difficulties they sometimes have to encounter in India itself, is the fact of finding themselves isolated as artists on return to their homeland. Without a support base their interest sags rapidly, often leading to a frustrating struggle. Serious dance students trained by a local teacher have the advantage of continuity in their training and also the possibility of the teacher, in certain cases, assuming the responsibility for their professional development and promotion.

### **The Audience**

Dance being one of the performing arts, an important factor to consider is the audience at whom this activity is directed and with whom it is shared. The audience for Indian classical dance is very special indeed and broadly consists of three streams of people. One, Westerners who have already

been exposed to Indian culture or heritage and have been in contact with "things" that are Indian. This contact may have been through philosophy, religion, yoga, meditation, visits to India or just simply having Indian friends. Two, persons from the artistic milieu such as musicians, painters, sculptors and of course other dancers who expose themselves to Indian dance so as to enlarge and widen their personal horizons and enjoy in sharing the experience. Third, those who belong to the Indian community and have an interest in Indian music and dance. Indian classical dancers are fortunate in that all three groups, before whom they usually perform, have already been initiated and are keen and enthusiastic about their involvement with Indian culture. In this sense they can be regarded as a group that does not have to be converted to the enjoyment of this form of dance.

At the same time, having been initiated to various forms of Indian dance or other arts, this type of audience has certain expectations which when fulfilled leave them with a strong feeling of enjoyment. Thus, with the passage of time, a loyal audience can be built up. This, however, does not preclude a continued effort to make Indian dance more appealing to a wider audience. This includes the important step of lifting this dance form from its current community moorings to the mainstream of the professional stage.

The situation relative to the key participants has been treated in detail in this presentation so that the teaching of Indian classical dance outside India can be viewed in the proper perspective. It is hoped that the observations that follow will be better understood in the light of what has been said above.

## TEACHING OBJECTIVES

In teaching students of Indian parentage, the objectives can be broadly defined as:

1. Exposure to Indian culture:
  - a) Exposure to philosophical concepts such as **dharma** (duty) and **bhakti** (devotion) with reference to narratives from the epics and mythology
  - b) Exposure to Indian aesthetics through the media of dance and music
  - c) Exposure to Indian traditions
2. Instilling a sense of pride in the Indian heritage.
3. Teaching of dance as an art form for its own sake.

For the Western (non-Indian) students, the teaching involves the following:

1. Explanations of the essentials of Indian traditions, religious concepts and background literature.
2. Study of comparative aesthetics.
3. Exposure to Indian music.
4. Teaching of Indian dance as an art form.

Regardless of which objectives one is pursuing in a given situation, the importance of strict discipline and the rigour of training cannot be over-emphasised. The learning process must not be allowed to degenerate into a casual courtship with Indian culture to be taken up or discarded on whim, for then nothing of lasting value is transmitted and no objective is achieved.

## APPROACHES TO TEACHING

Most of us who are teaching outside India are fully aware of the limitations under which we are trying to pursue our objectives. The teaching and learning processes are not being carried out in their natural setting. As such, many aspects of dance that are taken for granted in India, need to be elaborated upon. To instil a deeper feeling and sensitivity for the art form

the teacher has to painstakingly point out and explain the context and notions that underlie this art form and scrupulously follow the rituals and practices that are part of the tradition - whether it be the **pranam** (salutation) and recitation of a **sloka** at the start of the class, the visit and offering of **prasadam** at the local temple before their **Ranga Pravesh** (maiden performance of a full length Bharata Natya repertoire) or any other among the myriads of such conventional practices. During my visits to India, I have noticed that there is a tendency in certain quarters to put less emphasis on these practices on the ground that these are merely time-consuming formalities. However, at Kala Bharati, the children and particularly their parents find them meaningful exercises that help the students to centre and focus their energies.

Much, if not all, of this process outside India, is being carried out in a cultural vacuum, as it were, and as such, adherence to these rituals helps the student to better comprehend the import of what they are learning. Various arguments are put forward as to whether or not an altar with the presiding deity such as **Nataraja** should be placed on the stage. When one is learning in a country where Hindu temples are not a familiar sight, the altar on the stage with a **Nataraja** goes a long way to instil a feeling of **bhakti** (devotion) which is a dominant sentiment permeating Indian classical dance.

### **Methodology**

The learning process for some students may start as early as when they are four years old. However, rigorous training for Bharata Natya at Kala Bharati begins only when the child is at least seven years old. The pre Bharata Natya training comprises of dance activities and dance movements in compositions based on Indian music and themes. These compositions enable the children to get acquainted with the mythology and legends from India at the same time developing a sense of rhythm and music. These have been found to be useful in preparing the young students for training in classical dance.



which is undertaken later on. As part of the pre-Bharata Natya training they are taught the **hastas** (hand gestures) and **abhinaya** (facial expressions) while acting out some of the stories.

They are also encouraged to do some other dance-related activities in the Nrityalekha I, a dance notebook I have conceived of and brought out as a pedagogical tool to facilitate the teaching of dance. I shall refer to this work later on in this presentation.

At the Kala Bharati dance school the Bharata Natya dance lessons are divided into three parts - **one**, the learning and practice of **adavus** (the fundamental movements and steps that form the core of Bharata Natya dance style.\*); **two**, the learning of the items of a Bharata Natya repertoire and **three**, acquiring a theoretical base for better understanding of the art.

Strict adherence to the technique and lines that characterize the Pandanallur school of Bharata Natya marks the training in adavus at Kala Bharati. **Angasudha** (purity of lines) in execution of these fundamental units of dance is stressed. Detailed attention is paid to teaching the students the four **lakshanas** (components of the adavus): the **sthanaka** (posture or stance), **nritya hasta** (hand gestures used in the dances), **chari** (movements of hands and feet) and **hasta kshetra** (position or field of hands) so that in the execution of these fundamental units of dance, angasudha is not compromised. All the students, including the senior-most ones who have already had their Ranga Pravesh, have a period allotted every week for practising the adavus so as to maintain the precision and clarity of movements.

\* The **adavus** have been classified and codified by various gurus of different schools. The classification set out by guru U.S. Krishna Rao in his book "DICTIONARY OF BHARATA NATYA" (Orient Longmans) is being followed at Kala Bharati.

For the intermediate and advanced students the period of the adavu class is followed by a period devoted to learning dance items from the Bharata Natya repertoire. Beginners continue with adavu lessons till they acquire a certain level of proficiency which enables them to learn conventional dance items. I would like to add here that at Kala Bharati we have choreographed a few Bharata Natya items especially for young beginners. These items are less demanding than an **alarippu** or a **kauvuthuvam** but are as attractive. These items stimulate and sustain their interest while going through the painfully slow process of becoming at ease with the idiom and grammar of Bharata Natya.

An area in which considerable thought has been given is related to the story telling of Bharata Natya.

Learning (or teaching for that matter) to depict various emotions and feelings in dance numbers which include elaboration of mood (sancharibhava) is not an easy task even for children in India where they can pick up a lot of the nuances through osmosis. It poses a greater challenge when this process is being carried out outside India. Often **Sringara rasa** involving the emotions of forlorn love depicted in a verse which a dancer has to interpret, do not belong to the collage of experiences that the students residing abroad have personally gone through. The pleading of a **Nayika** (heroine) with her **Sakhi** (companion) to go and deliver a message to her beloved is not such a natural occurrence in the West where she is more likely to rely on more direct approaches. Such situations sometimes seem far fetched and difficult to interpret for young dancers not fully steeped in the traditions of India. On the other hand, **Bhakti rasa** (devotion) as a sentiment is more universal and is relatively easier to relate to. It is therefore necessary to choose the **pada-s** (verses) with prudence keeping in mind the skill and maturity of the dancer as also the constraints of the situation under which it is being learnt.

Another aspect of teaching **abhinaya** (mime) that needs to be explored is the creation of pieces that reflect the direct experiences of the child taking into account her age and background. It would not be out of place to illustrate this point with a concrete example.

In Bharata Natya, the **nava rasa** (nine sentiments or moods) are **adbhuta** (surprise), **bhayanaka** (fear), **bivhatsa** (disgust), **hasya** (laughter), **karuna** (pity), **raudra** (anger), **shanta** (peace), **sringara** (love) and **veera** (valour). Many verses have been written depicting all these nine rasas. In my attempt to teach the young children how to show the nine different moods I have composed a short piece about an incident involving a girl playing with her doll. It is an experience almost every child goes through and as such a young student can easily relate to this situation although it is being rendered in a purely classical idiom. A young delegate from Kala Bharati, Parvathi Nair, will demonstrate this item. She will follow this up with the **Ashta rasa sloka** which is a more mature piece, and show how the transference can be made.

Classes on the theory of dance are held less frequently but on a regular basis. These generally take the form of group discussions on important theoretical aspects of dance in general and in particular on topics related to Indian classical dance. Students are also encouraged to take up their own projects and study some particular aspects that interest them. Some students may express an interest in dance notations and choreography while others may prefer some better understanding of the **Natya Shastra** or **Abhinaya Darpana** - the treatises on which Bharata Natya is based. For these and other purposes dance schools operating outside India are obliged to have their own libraries and collections of audio-visual material. Kala Bharati has a resource and documentation centre in which there are over three hundred books on Indian dance, music and culture and also a large selection of audio-visual material.

Western students of Indian dance take greater interest in the academic

and theoretical aspects of dance. Many among this group have already had previous training in some other forms of dance and as such, cross-references to point out similarities and dissimilarities often prove helpful towards a better understanding of the art. I would like to add a note of caution here. I have found that there is a fascination for the exotic and the erotic aspects of Indian dance among some westerners. One has to curb any excessive preoccupation with such aspects and take corrective measures at an early stage by putting these in their proper perspectives.

Over the past few years one particular aspect of dance education I have personally been concerned with is the question of how to sustain the interest of the students in Indian classical dance in the face of so many competing hobbies and pastimes, some of which are totally alien to Indian culture. It is of little use to try and dissuade the young students from indulging in these activities - to ask them not to do disco dancing or break dancing if that is what they want to do. Instead, a lot can be achieved by making the pursuit of Indian classical dance more interesting and enjoyable by varying the routine of learning with the introduction of some allied activities. At Kala Bharati, the junior and intermediate students are encouraged to work with dance notebooks **Nritya Lekha I and II** which involve activities such as drawing, colouring, working on quizzes, word games and puzzles, etc. all related to dance. As stated in its preface, *Nritya Lekha* "was born out of a need and a desire. The need is one of stimulating an interest in the study of Indian dance and having once generated it to sustain it in the face of competing diversions. The desire is one of going beyond the boundaries of merely imparting the technique of how to dance into inducing an enthusiastic involvement with it."

The keyword here is enthusiastic involvement without which the student is likely to have only a brief courtship with the art. Even among

students who have taken it up seriously enough to continue to the level of their Ranga Pravesh, that is, giving a full length recital marking the completion of an advanced level of training, there is the danger of their completely suspending the dance activity soon thereafter. This disaffection with the art after so much of effort has gone into acquiring it, is indeed disturbing.

My own attempt at stemming this tendency is to constantly look for new avenues to generate enthusiastic involvement with dance among my students. One way is to get the student involved at all levels of a dance production. For example, for Kala Bharati dance presentations the senior students participate in the decision making process regarding decor, costumes, programme notes, etc, and in some instances even in choreography. Furthermore, some of the senior-most students are encouraged, after their Ranga Pravesh, to assist in teaching junior students.

In addition to their own involvement, the students are exposed to visiting performers who are invited to give lecture-demonstrations and workshops in the school.

Another activity of Kala Bharati that has met with considerable success is to help dance students present some aspect of Indian classical dance as a part of assignments or term papers for courses they are studying at their school or college. These presentations have been very well received by the teachers as well as their classmates. This appreciative response has spurred their interest on, as they feel proud that they are engaged in an activity that is worthwhile. It is this sense of pride that motivates them to continue with their dance activities and propels them to greater heights of proficiency. The sense of pride is instilled automatically when the dance teaching has as its goals the pursuit of excellence and a depth of understanding without which the whole exercise of learning becomes a superficial one and of little consequence.

As as of us here know there are no miracle formulas or magical short cuts to accomplishments that speak of excellence. It is based on sheer hard work and dedication, and for those of us teaching outside the country of origin, the task is a formidable one. Greater therefore is the sense of fulfillment when such work begins to yield perceptible results.

## **RESULTS AND CONCLUSION**

It is with a certain amount of satisfaction that I can say that the preservation and promotion of Indian classical dance outside India is possible and that approaches to teaching adopted at Kala Bharati discussed above have been fruitful and productive. Attrition rate at Kala Bharati is very low. Dance students who had joined at the inception of the school over ten years ago are continuing to learn and teach, some of them long after their Ranga Pravesh. Absenteeism is quite negligible even on days when Montreal is hit with a snowstorm. Montrealers and governmental agencies at all levels have been generous in their appreciation and support for the work being carried out. Other dance groups and professional associations have welcomed the presence of Indian classical dance in their midst. It has been possible to produce good dancers who compare favourably to dancers trained in India, including Jai Govinda, a professional Bharata Natya dancer of repute, who has trained entirely at Kala Bharati. Gurus, scholars and dancers visiting Montreal have noted this fact with admiration and respect.

I personally feel hopeful about these signs of a cornerstone being laid on which to build the future of teaching Indian classical dance outside India. Looking ahead I would venture to say that Indian classical dance will not only exist but flourish outside India and gain a greater recognition which it so richly deserve •

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