

Classical Indian dance is a prism to culture

By Vanita Shastri

November 15, 2003

Classical Indian dance is a complete art form as it offers a window into the manifold interrelated arts of India. It offers a meaningful prism to the Diaspora in its attempt to propagate their culture, language and values to their offspring.



Vanita Shastri

What makes classical Indian dance such a complete art form? It contains and is related to music, sculpture, literature and architecture. Good training in classical dance has the potential to elucidate the implicit and explicit connections of these art forms. With instruction in dance also begins training in music, as no dancer can dance without knowing tala (tempo), laya (speed), raga (scales and notes), jati (musical divisions) and shabda (lyrics) of the accompanying music. Music forces the student to comprehend the words of the composition, opening up a window into Indian languages. The repetitive rigor of the practice drills the lyrics, the melody and the rhythm until the student masters it all.

Over the course of a typical dance curriculum, a student hears numerous stories or memories of the distant culture and then learns to enact it in "Abhinaya," or expressive dance, which brings with it an introduction to classical and contemporary Indian literature. The sculptural poses that the Indian dancer assumes are often inspired from sculpture that adorn the walls of various Indian temples. These dance poses are often referred to as "movement frozen in stone." It introduces the student to geography, monuments, architecture, and the diverse history and development of art in India.

A continuing tradition of texts that capture the context, theory and techniques of these Indian performing arts exists. The student gets exposed to major texts such as Bharata's Natyashastra, Abhinayadarpana of Nandikesvara and Abhinaya Chandrika - from where the techniques of pure dance, or nritya, and expressive dance, or abhinaya, are derived. Abhinaya introduces the student to subtle meanings, emotions and nuances of the literature. They learn Rasa Theory, or how the body, the feet, eyes, neck, facial expressions all combine to evoke emotions. It is not just the meaning but the purpose or intent of the poet embedded in the literature that must be internalized by the student to be able to move the audience from within, rather than simply regurgitate fast movement and facial miming.

The rigorous techniques of dance make for a very good form of physical exercise, and in time aid the physical and internal development of the dancer. It is a combination of training the body and the mind. It instills grace, agility and a stylistic use of the body. The intense facial expressions, use of hand and body movements all combine to equip the dancer with the alphabet to communicate with larger audiences. It also provides the student with the possibility to reflect and to present oneself in different situations of life with poise.

Dance students learn from local teachers and often combine it with intense training under a teacher in India. These may be supplemented by short workshops held in North America with experts from India, which adds additional flavor to the training of dance. Last summer saw world-class artists such as Leela Samson and Kalanidhi Narayan giving workshops in Boston, and the great Odissi maestro Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra, in Washington, D.C.

Traditionally, classical Indian dance was performed in temples. Modern life has brought dance onto the stage, but much thought and emphasis is given during the training to retain the aura and ambience of the sacredness of the dance space. By learning how to create, manage and use this space the danseuse becomes keenly aware of how to invoke the space in form, and in movement.

The main purpose of classical Indian dance is to undertake a journey into the self and to further the aesthetic experience for both the dancer and the audience. It happens through an arduous discipline where the dancer explores one's identity, the purpose and the source of joy. Thus, learning classical Indian dance has the potential to transform the aspirant through the arts such as literature, music, architecture and philosophy to instill a deeper understanding of the arts and in parallel develop into a more complete and holistic human being.

Vanita Shastri is executive director of Meru Education Foundation (www.merufoundation.org). Her column appears every other month in INDIA New England.