



Dance Beyond Borders

Geetha Sridhar comprehensively discusses the spread and evolution of Bharatanatyam in the UK, and muses on its future

Sometime in 1838, a troupe of five devadasis, their nattuvanar and two other musicians signed a contract for a term of eighteen months with a French impresario, E.C. Tardivel. The dancers and their accompanying musicians were attached to the Perumal Temple of Thiruvendipuram in the French territory of Pondicherry. Billed as the 'real' Bayadères or priestesses of Pondicherry, they were the first Indian artistes to perform all over Europe. As soon as they arrived in Bordeaux on 24th July, the novelty was widely announced in French and British newspapers.

This possibly is the earliest evidence we have of Bharatanatyam being introduced to the western world. Legends like Uday Shankar and Ramgopal were catalysts in popularising Indian dance in the UK in the early 20th century. Today, the word 'Bharatanatyam' is not just a term put down to mean an 'ethnic dance style', but is certainly on its way to being a household name and practice.

To emphasise this notion, I take a linear approach, in saying that the key is good teaching (straying from 'Bharatanatyam for fitness', 'bollynatyam' or 'Indian

contemporary' as it is known in its many forms outside India). As a Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher based in London, my research is informal, based on my personal experiences, dance classes, *Arangetrams*, ISTD exams, scholarship programmes and education sectors. My informants are mainly my colleagues and collaborators.

AMBASSADORS OF CULTURE

Often, people ask me what I think of the future of Bharatanatyam in the UK. My unwavering answer is that it is bright! If Indian dance has made the journey of 2,000 years, then surely it can continue for another 2,000! The abounding qualities of the style

are reason enough for its longevity in its motherland. It is no different in diaspora. There has always been a need for Indian dance in Britain. Of course, it stems from the Indian communities wanting to keep in touch with their tradition and legacy. The sprightly fourth-generation British-Asian population is on the cusp of picking up the baton for Indian arts and culture. This inspiration reflects an innate passion and faith in our cultural heritage.

But how is this inspiration nurtured? Much of the credit goes to the numerous institutions like Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan, Tamil schools and over a hundred independent dance teachers. Here, Bharatanatyam is taught in its traditional format of *adavus*, *korvais*, and repertoire items. This training equips the students with a strong foundation. Students often use their art for self-identity. In some cases, on embracing two cultures, their creativity disseminates and diverges to produce new

work by collaborating or fusing styles.

A typical training session for a Bharatanatyam class would be approximately an hour or two once a week. Plainly this is insufficient and inadequate for both the student and teacher to progress. Sometimes it is simply not feasible to have more lessons. The reasons vary from transport issues to expenses. A government initiative called the Centre for Advanced Training (CAT), which facilitated the South Asian Strand in 2009, tackles this issue by awarding bursaries and scholarships to students who are keen to pursue their interest in Bharatanatyam or Kathak. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to attend summer camps organised by arts institutions. They also provide platforms for upcoming performers to showcase their new work. Professional dancers in the country often mentor them.

The UK boasts of several resident Bharatanatyam dancers, namely Chitra Sundaram, Pushkala Gopal, Shobana Jeysingh, Anusha Subrahmaniam, Mavin Khoo and visiting artistes such as Leela Samson, Priyadharshini Govind, Viji Prakash and more. These artists are known for both their traditional and contemporary work. Their traditional *Margam* (repertoire) performance is always a pleasure to watch and an incentive for the students to excel in their practice.

SEEKING UNIFORMITY

A good proportion of the students I interviewed felt that the future of Bharatanatyam was strong. However, there is a varied spectrum in the quality of the form being taught in the UK. Standardising teaching practices of South Asian dances in the UK is an absolute necessity and a regulated system has been set up for quality control. The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) has formulated a syllabus, which caters to some needs. This dance examination board included the South Asian grade examinations in 1999. Since its launch, there has been a notable rise in the number of dance schools participating and benefiting. The designed syllabus is strategic in the preparation of professional dancers and teachers. The six grade examinations offered covers an ample time scale for a student to consider a debut performance. The ISTD also introduced 'The Education and Training Department' in 2002 which aids continuous professional development, by accrediting teaching qualifications. This kind of holistic training philosophy, when invested in students, can certainly affirm a better quality of dance in the future.

Geetha Sridhar prepares a student for *Arangetram*



More refreshing and reassuring is the support and encouragement provided by the education sector of the British system. Ten years ago, an average primary school would employ an Indian dancer as a one-off, to simply demonstrate a dance piece and conduct a token workshop. This was offered as part of a bundle to understand the topic of 'India' better, rather than read it off a textbook, and sometimes even included Indian cuisine. These days, multiculturalism in Britain canvasses more than just a curry, thankfully. For example, GCSE Dance includes Shobana Jeysingh's work as part of their syllabus. At a higher level, there are universities that offer courses that include Indian classical dances or dance studies. Roehampton University offers South Asian Dance Studies with a wide range of modules such as British Multiculturalism, Dance Migration, Globalisation and more.

GROWING ROOTS

In my own experience being a lecturer at Kingston University in London and having delivered lectures and studio sessions, I can confidently say that it is a healthy engagement for both my students and myself. Jason Piper, the head of dance at Kingston believes and endorses the motto "Excellence through Diversity". Bharatanatyam features as part of the curriculum, alongside other genres such as Capoeira, Wushu, African, and Hip hop to name a few. The three-year graduate

programme includes modules with various aspects of Bharatanatyam each year under the titles of Dancing Histories, Dancing Cultures, and Production Project. This spread enables me to start with simple studio-based work to raise the awareness of the genre of Bharatanatyam in the first year, and build it up to a deeper level of understanding classicism through the works of *Natyasastra* in the following years. It is truly rewarding to see the outcome of choreographies by students based on a strong foundation and informed knowledge.

In the UK there is a constant flow of immigrant populations. This necessitates greater access to Indian arts and culture. And by the laws of supply and demand, whether it be the ritualistic initiation ceremony of an *Arangetram*, formal training through the education sector or simply a way to keep up with their roots, Britain has eminent dance teachers who offer quality teaching. This is evident with the rise in the number of homegrown British-Asian dancers and dance teachers.

Bharatanatyam in the UK has gained its identity and a well-secured place in society and is certainly on its way to becoming a jewel in the crown of Britain. ■

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