

In Quest of a Canadian Identity in Dance: Bharata Natyam Conference, Winnipeg, February 18-20, 1994

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The Winnipeg Bharata Natyam Conference, *In Quest of a Canadian Identity in Dance*, set out to explore the justification for learning, performing, and enjoying Indian classical dance in the Canadian context. Organized by Raga-Mala Performing Arts of Canada and the India School of Dance, Music and Theatre of Winnipeg, the conference concentrated on *bharata natyam* and related styles of classical Indian dancing, and it consisted of workshops, lecture-demonstrations, academic papers, audio-visual presentations, and a grand showcase of performances at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, which naturally turned out to be the highlight of the undertaking.

The Dance Showcase of *bharata natyam*, *kuchipudi*, and *odissi* included no less than nine performances. The last item, a *tillana* in Rag Brindavana Saranga performed by Sharmini Puvirajah, Mona Bector, Versha Bhatnagar, Tripat Pachu, and Romona Goomansingh (all of the India School of Dance, Music and Theatre), was a colourful finale to the scintillating showcase. The program was unique as it had three male dancers: Jai Govinda as Rama, Hari Krishnan as Krishna, and Ravi Sundaram Mony as Satyabhama (in an excerpt from “Bhama Kalapam”, in *kuchipudi*). To add to the richness a fourth male dancer, Devesh Soneji, was on hand to provide substantial moral and intellectual support to the whole event. Janani Swamy, Lata Pada, and Soumya Bhaskaran performed in traditional *bharata natyam* style, while young Gargy Banerjee captivated the audience with her Odissi. Namrata Chansarkar performed an invocation in *kuchipudi* style, choreographed by Vempati Chinna Satyam. On the opening night Tina Thottingal danced a *mohini attam* item, a rare treat indeed!

The organizers, Pamela Rebello and Sunil Choubal, deserve a lot of praise for bringing together so many talented and dedicated artists from all over the country. Other organizations represented were: Dance Manitoba (Nestor M. Dudych); The Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg (Chris Hidalgo-Mazzei); Canadian Heritage – Multicultural Programs (Maria Lonardelli-Abiussi); The Government of Manitoba – Culture, Heritage & Recreation (Kathleen McMillan). Through the interaction of all who attended the conference a network was developed that will be helpful in providing continuing educational cooperation and opportunity.

The themes dealt with during the conference were appropriate, ambitious, and timely. Each will be dealt with in turn.

Exploring new themes for *bharata natyam*

It was agreed that we have inherited a powerful, beautiful, and tightly-integrated system in the form of the present day *bharata natyam* concert repertoire, but can we introduce into it changes or new themes without destroying it? One simplistic answer to the problem, as one speaker pointed out, would be to consider the *abhinaya* [expression] and *nritta* [pure dance] repertoire of *bharata natyam* as purely instrumental and to use it to portray new themes outside of the customary *varnam-padam* corpus. Other suggestions included performing dance dramas instead of always featuring a soloist, and exploring other *ras* [moods] instead of always relying on the *sringara* [romantic] *ras*. Almost all speakers agreed on the fact that *bharata natyam* has never been static, and that there have always been innovations contributing to this highly-evolved dance form. Some practitioners described their own efforts to bring about a new direction: group presentations; mixing different traditions of dance such as *bharata natyam* and *kathak*; doing away with *sahitya* [the lyric] and relying only on instrumental music.

Propagating Indian dance forms in the Diaspora

The Indian community in North America, like any other emigrant community, faces the problem of preserving its culture and identity. Religion and the fine arts are the two most common vehicles for re-establishing or reinforcing cultural identity. The paradox is that while in North America adequate financial resources exist, there is nonetheless a lack of cultural resources – in particular good teachers who can run comprehensive dance courses. As a result, *bharata natyam* tends to be divorced from its natural base in *Karnatak* [South Indian] music, and is taught as a drill that is not grounded in dance/music theory. Yet still the demand for training grows, especially from those families who in the past may not have been interested in the arts but who now realize the potential for social prestige. So while on the one hand there is much more interest and enthusiasm for dance, even more than in India, there are shortcomings: not only are there inadequate teaching resources but there is also a lack of competition; furthermore, the community may think it has attained “the real thing” and that it has created an Indian cultural identity whereas in fact it has the merest introduction to the Indian arts.

The presentation of classical dance to Canadian audiences

Almost everyone agreed that the dancer's or dance teacher's mission is to be obedient to the laws written down in treatises such as the *Natyashastra* [c. 200 A.D.] without diluting them. It was also agreed that the teaching of dance appreciation is as important as the teaching of dance, music, and dance theory.

Teaching classical dance in Canada

The final session proved to be argumentative but productive. Questions raised dealt with the problem of changing teachers, the advisability of practicing at home with video tapes after students have learned the basics directly from the teacher in class, and the need for a well-defined syllabus for the teaching of dance. Indeed the India School of Dance, Music and Theatre of Winnipeg presented a well-researched and well-written curriculum for the teaching and certification of *bharata natyam*.



Left to right, standing: Devesh Soneji, Hari Krishnan, Vic Goomansingh, Pamela Rebello, Sunil Choubal, Ravi Mony, Jai Govinda. **Sitting:** Soumya Bhaskaran, Lata Pada, Gargi Banerjee, Janani Swami, Namrita Chansarkar, Jaya Subramaniam.

Conclusions

All this makes one wonder about the title of the conference and indulge in some reflection. Can one confer a Canadian identity on Indian classical dance? What is happening in Canada (and the USA) is a craving to learn *bharata natyam* in a Canadian context. The context does not affect content except in a pejorative sense: i.e., classical dance teaching can be diluted considerably in a foreign setting without watchful peer-group competition. Otherwise, the content remains broadly the same. In fact, non-Indian Canadians and Americans learning Indian classical dance often become ultra purists and wish to be recognized in a competitive atmosphere in India. Some of them are highly successful and are right at the top.

To summarize, the content must remain largely Indian when the context becomes Canadian. This context provides opportunities but also poses difficulties: in a non-competitive atmosphere far away from India there is a basic problem of finding good teachers, good singers, and competent accompanists. On the other hand, the relatively affluent Indian community has more finances and leisure time to spend on learning its classical dance traditions, and thus more opportunity to put it across to the general Canadian audience. In this process it retains an Indian identity in the Canadian context. That is not too small a prize to forego or neglect.

Jaya Subramaniam is a librarian and a former performer of *bharata natyam*. She has produced a number of programs for television and radio popularising Indian dance, and has staged Buddhist themes in *bharata natyam* and *kathakali* dance dramas. Her research interests include the Indian Diaspora in the West, and she is a founder of the South India Cultural Association of Ottawa.

