

Pursuing dance in India's metropolitan cities poses a formidable challenge for dancers. One young Bharatanatyam teacher I have spoken to has 8 assistants and 300 students in a Mumbai suburb. How else can you afford rent in the city of dreams? Driving through the clutter of billboards, trash-lined streets, the smell of the polluted sea in the evening, the impatient honking, loud re-mixed music, and endless lines and traffic jams, one really marvels at the tenacity it takes to create something in the city!

But the cacophony of the city is forgotten when sitting with over 600 people to watch 2 hours of Kathakali, all eyes and ears attentive to every detail of the movements and music. People from all walks of life, old and young, converge at the city's performing arts centres to attend performances. Every dancer dreams of performing to a large and diverse audience. Calls of 'bravo' erupt from the enthusiastic audience following a masterful performance in the annual Mudra Dance Festival at NCPA. Artists and writers sit together over a cup of tea in a theatre café, discussing the play they just saw. Young dancers get together on a Saturday morning to share ideas of their new work. The city is a dynamic and exhilarating creative space, with its limitless possibilities for fruitful interactions, exchanges, and high density of people and ideas.

Bombay is the centre of Bollywood, the financial capital of India. It is not considered of much significance as far as dance is concerned. Surprisingly, however, the dance we call 'Indian classical' today has always had a close relation with Bombay and its films for decades. Film dance is a form that was once closely linked to traditional training. The prominence of dance in films shows how dance is central to all areas of Indian culture, whether in the exuberance of Bollywood, or the expressiveness of classical forms. Although we tend to associate dance in India, particularly classical or folk, with the idyllic countryside, the cities have always played an important role in the development of these arts. While the origins may be in smaller, less cosmopolitan centres, it is in the

big cities that dance flourishes as an art form.

## ORIGINS



Dance in India is constantly evolving, but there are certain moments in history that have impacted what we see on stage today. There are certain turning points in dance history which have left indelible impressions on the art form. One of these is the Bhakti movement (14th-17th century), a time of growth for Indian dance and music. At this time, the connection between the performing arts and religion became strongest. Spirituality, bhakti (a connection with the divine), is a prominent feature of classical Indian dance. Drama and the element of storytelling and character development is important in Indian classical dance. In India, religion, drama, music, dance, painting, poetry, sculpture, are inextricably linked.

Another important turning point, though hundreds of years later, was India's independence in 1947, which sparked a search for a distinct Indian identity post-1947. It was at this point that most of the classical dance forms were consolidated and codified, according to different regions of the country- Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh, Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu, Odissi from Orissa, etc. Many great gurus were involved in this process, such as Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986) in Bharatanatyam, Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926-2004) in Odissi, Vempati Chinna Satyam (born 1929) in Kuchipudi. They structured the training process of these dance forms, making it possible for wide variety of people to learn them. They also expanded the repertoire and refined the aesthetics of these dance forms, giving them an international urban appeal. Dance in India has historically taken place in three main spaces- the temple, the village, and the royal courts. The temple was the centre of activity in the village. Education, economics, politics, religion, and social life all centered around the temple. Bharatanatyam, for example, has its origins in the temple dance traditions of Tamil Nadu, earlier called 'sadir'. Devadasis (temple dancers) dedicated their lives to perform songs and dances as an important part of temple rituals, processions and festivities.

Odissi has its origins in the temple dance traditions of the Maharis of Orissa. These were female dancers, performing songs and dances within specific areas of the temple for the god of the temple, or for temple patrons, usually in a very small space near the sanctum sanctorum, other times in procession.

Similarly, the central village square, a maidan, is an important site of dance performance, where there may be a built structure for performance, or simply a cleared empty space. Dance forms like Kuchipudi, originated from the performance practice of groups of men who would travel from village to village enacting dance dramas. The royal courts were the site of development of Kathak and other story-telling dance traditions. In the temple, village square, or royal court, there was no proscenium stage, nor the amplified sound, front facing audience, wings, lighting and other accessories that come with the modern urban performance theatre.

Today, most dancers design programs for the performing arts centres of the big metropolitan cities, with their diverse audiences, some of whom are well-informed, others are completely new to the art form, and all of whom have taken out time from fast-paced lives to buy a ticket and sit in the theatre for that unique artistic experience. For any artist, it is important to find the right environment to feel inspired and free to make an honest expression.

There are various approaches to being a dancer in the big city. Some choreographers in the metropolitan cities incorporate the diverse influences of living in an intensely busy city space, the advantages of access to sponsors, international funding agencies, sensitive audiences, and being able to learn from the best of international performers and dance companies through exchanges that occur mainly in the cities.

## DANCE VILLAGE



For many artists, being surrounded by nature, simplicity, austerity is the right setting.

But such spaces are increasingly difficult to come by in the big cities. One model for creating dance in the city is to re-create the village atmosphere within the city, such as Kalakshetra, Chennai. Situated on 100 acres of land near in the southern end of Chennai, Kalakshetra is a peaceful haven for Bharatanatyam, founded in 1936 by Rukmini Devi Arundale. Over the years, the city has grown around Kalakshetra, but has not managed to creep in through its walls. There is still no television, strictly vegetarian Indian food, limited internet access, and students are usually attired in saris and dhotis.

Of course, a silent external environment does not guarantee inner peace. It only increases the chances of finding the sound of your inner voice. Some students come out of idyllic dance-ashram educations and rebel. They want to do what they were not allowed to do inside the campus. Many of them take on a sedentary lifestyle and forget the discipline and philosophy of those years of intense dance education.

35 kilometres outside Bangalore, there is a different and beautiful solution to the challenges of dancing in the noise and clutter of the city. It is the dance village called 'Nriyagram', started by Protima Gauri who said,

"I dream of building a community of dancers in a forsaken place amidst nature. A place where nothing exists, except dance. A place where you breathe, eat, sleep, dream, talk, imagine -dance. A place where all the five senses can be refined to perfection. A place where dancers drop negative qualities such as jealousy, small-mindedness, greed and malice to embrace their colleagues as sisters and support each other in their journey towards becoming dancers of merit." "A place called Nriyagram." – Protima Gauri (October 12, 1948 - August 18, 1998)

It is an idyllic setting, a sanctuary to a few of the finest dancers in India today. From dawn to dusk, they work towards creating some of the most exquisitely beautiful Odissi productions. Through their tireless work at Nriyagram, the lead dancers, Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy have raised the standards of perfection and power of Indian

classical dance performances.

Next month, the dance village comes to the big city of Bombay, from 25 August to 2 September, when Nrityagram will be resident at NCPA for a precious week of performances, master classes, and a seminar. Their new work, 'Samhara: the Braid' is a collaboration with the Chitrasena Dance Company of Sri Lanka, and it received rave reviews when it premiered in New York City this spring. It will premiere in Mumbai at NCPA on September 2. To survive as an art form, dance has to survive in the city. Fortunately, the city also provides unique, significant opportunities and inspiring diversity. For most artists, a peaceful external environment helps nurture creativity. The city tests your resilience, but it also provides a dynamism and density of interactions that can lead to rich artistic results.

AMRITA LAHIRI | JUNE 22, 2012

