

Pursuing dance is an unusual professional choice, and while it is more common to select Bharatnatyam, Odissi or Kathak, which most people have heard of and seen, Kuchipudi dancers like myself often find ourselves explaining even the basics. Yet any viewer, informed or not, who watches a dance performance feels the communicative power of this art form with or without explanation. And it is this communicative potential which reaffirms our conviction in pursuing dance.

One of the things I was told constantly as a child learning Kuchipudi dance is ‘practice makes perfect’. This is fundamentally true. Acquiring good technique comes only with practice. But I also often heard senior dancers say ‘the most important thing is to perfect the technique and then un-learn it’. I wondered as a child what they meant by this ‘un-learning’. Would this old lady spontaneously break out into freestyle moves? What I understood later is that they stopped thinking of the dance as a form to be perfected and started using it as a language instead. Fluency takes precedence over grammar. Rather than an end in itself, dance becomes a means to an end -- to communicate with an audience, with yourself, or perhaps, momentarily, with divinity.

My belief in the power of dance communication, especially Kuchipudi, was reaffirmed this year in the most unlikely of places: a small town in rural Rajasthan where I danced for SPICMACAY. We drove through a dirt road wide enough for just one vehicle to pass, two hours from Kota to Baran, and onward to one of the neighbouring villages. We wound our way through vast fields to a small temple where children of the local schools had congregated to watch our performance. It was a romantic rural setting -- surrounded on all sides by green fields, dancing under the branches of a towering old peepal tree, in front of a small Hanuman mandir, performing for hundreds of children, their faces full of curiosity.

The receptiveness and connection of these children broke the stereotypes that I have heard about classical dance. These children spoke only Hindi and Awadhi (I conducted

the entire one hour lecture-performance in Hindi- a new accomplishment with my limited Hindi vocabulary), and they watched attentively and picked up the meaning of the Kuchipudi dances in Telugu. They live in the interiors of rural Rajasthan, born into modest farmers' families, but were fully engaged by what is usually labeled an 'elitist high art' form like classical Indian dance. It is the receptiveness of an audience that matters- anyone who gives dance a chance, cannot resist its appeal. To appreciate Kuchipudi, one does not need to be Telugu or south Indian or an expert on classical dance. One needs only to be receptive to the language of dance.

'Why is a Bengali girl pursuing Kuchipudi?' I often get asked. I doubt that the same question is posed to hundreds of Bharatanatyam dancers who are not from Tamil Nadu. Perhaps Bharatanatyam is considered more pan-Indian, while Kuchipudi refers to the dance of a small village in Andhra, which most people cannot locate on a map. I hope that in the near future I will not be faced with this question as frequently, as more young people take up Kuchipudi as a profession, and since Kuchipudi is constantly expanding beyond its regional identity, while still retaining its Telugu roots.

To answer the question of why a Bengali girl is pursuing Kuchipudi, it happened by chance. My parents were in Washington D.C. in the 1980's and searching for a good dance teacher for me and my sister, then 6 and 4 years old. At a dinner party, they met Anuradha Nehru, whom my mother had seen perform at the World Bank. I, my sister and three other little girls were Anuradha Aunty's first students. Today, her institution, Kuchipudi Kalanidhi, has over 80 students, and the best Kuchipudi training perhaps around the world, ironically taking place in USA! My parents were not concerned with the form of dance, rather with finding a good teacher. And this seemed a fortuitous choice and a wise one- dance is a language- whatever form one chooses, what makes it an art is clear expression through movement.

Telugu may not be my mother-tongue, but Kuchipudi is my first and strongest mode of expression. In my struggle to reconcile these two cultures- my Bengali heritage by birth

and the dance form of Andhra that I have chosen- I recently came across an interesting choreographic challenge- creating a Kuchipudi repertoire using Rabindranath Tagore's writings. Dancing on a Bengali text was a refreshing change from all the difficult translations and memorization I normally do before starting a Telugu piece. However, retaining the Kuchipudi flavour of the piece using Tagore's poetry was tough. From audience and critics' reactions, the choreography seems to have been effective.

In September 2013 I performed this production in Singapore for the Samarpana festival. I presented an abridged version of Tagore's Chitrangada focusing on only the character of Chitrangada herself. No props, no costume changes, no other dancers. Only a solo enactment of the story of Chitrangada- her falling in love with Arjuna, her transformation, rejection, and ultimate realization. The choreography included spoken lines from Tagore's drama- both in Bengali and English- my own spin on Kuchipudi's 'vachika abhinaya'. It was a thrilling amalgamation of the two cultures from Andhra and Bengal!

Kuchipudi, like all classical Indian dances, has a long history dating back over 500 years and in the future it will continue to thrive as a vital artistic expression. Unfortunately, it has become somewhat fashionable to speak about the dwindling audiences for classical Indian dance, as though it is a dying language. My experience as the Head of Dance Programming for nearly three years from 2010 to 2013 at the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai was another reaffirmation of my conviction in the vitality of dance. It was with a deep sense of satisfaction that I watched large audiences in Mumbai attending two-hour Kathakali plays. Nothing gave me more joy than to find overflowing audiences for young dancers, some of whom Mumbai had never even heard of. Numerous times during those three years, we had to turn away people from the theatre sometimes because tickets had sold out! It is only a matter of presenting consistently high quality performances combined with sincere efforts from presenters to publicise the performance in advance. Classical dance, whether Kuchipudi or other, is an expression which when presented with attention to aesthetics, can touch any

open-minded viewer.

To ensure that it is a living language, and for Kuchipudi to evolve, one of the greatest challenges is to keep the core of the art, while making it palatable and accessible for global audiences. The uninitiated palate cannot handle the intense spicy heat of a typical Andhra meal for example. This does not require dilution of the form. Rather, it requires exploring the deepest roots of the art to make a careful selection of elements which retains the essence, while also nourishing the soul of a viewer. Ideally, what we serve up must be simultaneously flavourful and nutritious, without crudely overpowering the senses. Only if it is a living and evolving vocabulary will it remain vibrant.

Another challenge is to create an inclusive and supportive community of Kuchipudi dancers committed to quality. The dance is not limited to any one community or state or village. It went far beyond that 70 years ago with the work of the great gurus of Kuchipudi, who believed in inclusiveness. Such gurus were teaching students who were non-Telugu and teaching a traditional male dance form even to women as early as the 1930's!

An uncompromising commitment to quality rather than quantity is also something that is rare today. Unfortunately, when the Kuchipudi community converges, such conventions boast more quantity than quality, with uninspiring accomplishments such as 300 Kuchipudi dancers dancing a 10-minute item together in a stadium. While spreading Kuchipudi widely is important, going deeper into its roots and higher into fruitful branches will add vibrancy and depth to the art form for generations to come.

Kuchipudi is one of the most precious cultural gems that Andhra Pradesh has given the world, and it has spread far from the small village in the East Godavari district. Even growing up in a Bengali family in Washington D.C. , I learnt Kuchipudi and I continue to perform and teach the dance form even while living in Mumbai today. Though I may not be fluent in Telugu, and not entitled to the culture of Andhra by birth, I am grateful

for having inherited this language from my gurus, and strive to extend and share the communicative potential of this art form.

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