

## Nrityagram and the Passion for Dance



Doyenne Kalanidhi Narayanan conducting a workshop on interpretative dance



Dancers performing in the amphitheatre of Nrityagram

*Nrityagram, the dance village, is a paradise where dancers, musicians, writers and theatre people frequently come together for workshops to pool their creative energies.*

Nestled amidst the sylvan woods of Hessargetta, Nrityagram, the dance village, thirty miles outside the urban limits of Bangalore is a ten acre farmland, a paradise where dancers, musicians, writers and theatre people frequently come together for workshops to pool their creative energies, enthused by the overwhelming fertility of Nature all round. This brainchild of the late Protima Bedi was the unlikely dream for one growing amidst high society and the glare of Bollywood in Bombay, whose life turned topsy-turvy the day she casually went to an auditorium to pick up a friend and was held mesmerised by the magic of the late Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra performing Odissi. Gone were the images of the near-bald male performer, with *paan* stained teeth. All that remained was the ecstasy, passion and melting grace of the dance and the conviction that she had to learn it, come what may. Backstage after the performance she accosted Guruji, "Guruji, please teach me this dance." Looking up and down at this pant-clad, pony-tailed figure in stiletto heels, the Guru nonchalantly set a condition. "Only if by the time I reach Cuttack by train tomorrow and see a saree-clad woman, with a bindi on the forehead, sitting on the doorstep of my house, will I consider the request." Sure of having gotten rid of this oddity, Kelucharan

Mohapatra forgot about the incident till - lo and behold - alighting from the rickshaw, he was greeted by a demure figure in saree and blouse with a neat bindi decorating the forehead sitting "like patience on a monument" on the verandah steps! Unable to deny such persistence, Guruji asked Protima to join his class and do as the others did, still convinced that this flash in the pan interest would soon peter out. Protima persevered and only much later when Guruji went to Bombay to conduct classes did she get the necessary individual attention to polish up her dance, to finally become a well known Odissi performer.

The idea of a dance village, in the manner of Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra, (coincidentally Rukmini Devi too started learning Bharatanatyam when she was nearly 30 years old) far from the assaulting sounds and distractions of a city possessed Protima a few years later. Haunting the home of the then Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde, she finally succeeded in getting for lease, in the same region, where land was demarcated for the film city, ten acres for a dance village. "I think the Chief Minister got so driven and fed up of seeing me everywhere - when he was in office, when he went home, when he came out of the room to the gardens - he decided the only way to get rid of me was to lease the land", Protima was to remark comically much later - though she never denied that but for a forward looking CM, her vision would have remained unfulfilled. Then came the gruelling months working with architect Gerard De Cunha to raise funds, design and build cottages as lodging and teaching space for gurus and students. Living in a tent, with snakes and scorpions as frequent visitors, and toilet facilities at a distance to be reached with the help of a torch guiding one at night, Protima took all the hardship in her stride. Finally it was a proud moment in 1990 on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May when Nrityagram was inaugurated by none less than the then Prime Minister of India, the late Mr. V.P. Singh.

Sharing her dreams and aspirations was Protima's prime disciple Surupa Sen, who as the soul mate of her Guru, was destined to step in overnight as the person presiding over the dance Gurukul, when death prematurely snatched Protima away from the scene in 1998 in a landslide in the Himalayan region. Surupa was left with her fellow disciple Bijayini Satpathy a priceless dancer initially groomed under Gangadhar Pradhan of Bhubaneswar. Surupa's superbly creative mind with her imaginative choreographic concepts, visualised by the incredible body of Bijayini along with the ensemble productions, which have raised the bar for group choreography, have made Nrityagram a place to reckon with in Odissi.

Protima's instincts in certain other areas were unerring. Lynne Fernandez who since 1993 has been with Nrityagram as Managing Trustee, was an actress and light designer having worked with theatre people

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## Cultural Calendar for April 2010

### April 7

Bharatanatyam Recital  
by Vikas & Samanthi, Graduates of Kalakshetra  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

### April 9

Film: Kathakali (Documentary - with English subtitles)  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration: 1 hr 30 min

### April 16

Film: Sampurn Ramayan (In Hindi)  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration: 3 hrs

### April 19

Film: • Bharatanatyam  
• Odissi (Documentaries - with English subtitles)  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration: 1 hr 25 min

### April 21

Film: • Kuchipudi  
• Mohiniyattam (Documentaries - with English subtitles)  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration: 1 hr 30 min

### April 23

Bharatanatyam Recital  
by Ms. Suriyakala Jeevanathan & her students  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

### April 27

Talk cum Panel Discussion on "Economic Prospects of Sri Lanka, with special focus on the North and East" by Dr. Muttukrishna Sarvanathan, Principal Researcher, Point Pedro Institute of Development, Point Pedro. The talk will be followed by brief remarks by two discussants, after which the floor will be thrown open to the audience for questions & comments  
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m

### April 30

Hindustani Vocal Music Recital by Shastrapati Sangeet Nipun Asith Attapattu  
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

(Admission to all programmes is free and on first come first served basis)



Radha and Krishna in a Manipuri item

like Barry John, Joy Michael and Lillete Dubey. She was persuaded by Protima to visit Nrityagram. After a two month stay there, getting a feel of the place and helping Protima in a friendly manner in various ways, she was caught off guard when Protima told her that she was making her the Managing Trustee of Nrityagram. "But why?" asked the bewildered Lynne. "I am not even from the dance field and know little about classical dance." "I have Surupa for that. You need not worry. For the last several days that you have been here with us, you have worked without once asking for anything for yourself. You have thought only of the institution. I am convinced that you are the person I need for Nrityagram" and ever since Lynne has made Nrityagram her home, working for the institution day and night.

The Odissi Gurukul goes from strength to strength, its proficiency earning Nrityagram the highest of laurels. The amazing number of hours of dance put in by this ensemble has to be seen to be believed. With Yoga, Meditation, Martial arts training, study of Sanskrit, Mythology and Literature, the opportunities for integrated learning are endless. With artistes from all disciplines and choreographers from round the world dropping in constantly to interact with the students, the inmates have a rare artistic ambience, inculcating an awareness of the give and take between art forms. Each aspect of dance presentation, music, rhythm, costuming, lighting and space coverage is meticulously attended to in all productions. The finesse and excellence of Nrityagram performances sets them apart. The dancers work on the farm too and this feel for earth imparts to the dance a quality that is special - a view shared strongly by both late Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (who attributed his art sensitivity to having worked in a betel leaf orchard watering and looking after the plants) and Protima herself.

As Protima always maintained "Nrityagram is a way of life."

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# SANDEESH

The monthly newsletter of the Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo



The Gypsies, Raja Ravi Varma

April 2010



## Indian Cultural Centre

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## Past Events

### 11th February

Talk: Findings of Ramayana (critical analysis of Ramayana by Western critics) by Mr. Neil Kiriella



Mr. Neil Kiriella, Chairman, Ramayan Trail Executive committee, Ministry of Tourism, Sri Lanka delivered a talk on "Findings of Ramayana (critical analysis of Ramayana by Western critics)". The lecture was followed by a question and answer session with the audience. Around 30 guests attended the event.

### 17th February

"Lord Curzon & British Imperial Policy in India" Talk by: Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management & Human Rights  
Discussant: Mr. Gomin Dayasri, Senior Lawyer & Political Analyst



The Indian Cultural Centre organised a panel discussion on "Lord Curzon & British Imperial Policy in India" on 17th February at the Indian Cultural Centre. The talk on the subject was by Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management & Human Rights. Mr. Gomin Dayasri, Senior Lawyer & Political Analyst also further discussed on the subject. The discussion was followed by an interactive session in which the audience also shared their comments and views. The discussion was followed by a reception. Around 50-60 guests attended the discussion.

### 26th February

Thiagarajar Aradhana



Over 250 musicians and aficionados of Carnatic Music from various parts of Sri Lanka, including Batticaloa and Jaffna, assembled at the Indian Cultural Centre to sing Saint Tyagaraja's compositions under the direction of Kalasuri Smt. Arundati Sriranganathan for paying homage to the great saint and musician. Of special mention are five of his compositions called the Pancharatna Krithis (English: 'five gems'), which are often sung in programs in his honour.

### 19th February

Hindustani Vocal Music Recital by Visharada Chandrika Rajapakse



Visharada Chandrika Rajapakse presented a memorable evening of Hindustani Vocal Music recital at the Centre. His programme lasted for an hour and half and he sang several ragas and songs. It was a treat for all music lovers. Around 40 -50 guests participated.

### 23rd February

Hindi Certificate Distribution Ceremony



A function to award certificates to the ICC students who had successfully cleared the Hindi Language examinations held in March 2009 was held at the Indian Cultural Centre. The annual examinations are conducted by the Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Agra, India. The students received the certificates and prizes from Shri Dinkar Asthana, Director of the Indian Cultural Centre. The programme commenced with a welcome address by ICC Hindi Teacher Prof. Lakshman Senevirathne and a speech by Shri Dinkar Asthana. Ms. Nadheera Shevanthi delivered the vote of thanks. The programme concluded with light refreshments. Around 100 students received certificates.

## Nrityagram and the Passion for Dance.. Contd.

During the annual Vasantahabba celebration, to watch over 40,000 spectators seated in the open air amphitheatre watching all night performances of music and dances of all hues is an unforgettable sight.

It was in 1996 that the Ensemble's life-changing New York debut made the landmark break into mainstream performing in North America – a status very few classical Indian troupes have been given. This tour was without Protima who had to keep the home fires burning in Nrityagram and unfortunately she never lived to see the mainstream performances of Nrityagram. Performing to sold-out shows in Hawai and Bozeman, USA, Middle East, Far East and Europe, the Nrityagram Ensemble has created a niche for itself in the world of art.

Apart from the Odissi inherited from the Guru, Nrityagram has done a lot of innovative work enabled by grants from National Dance Project of the New England Foundation for the Arts and most recently Joyce Theatre. Apart from the *Tribhanga* (the three bend posture and *Chauka* (square half-seated stance with the knees turned out), the main stylistic concerns of Odissi, the Nrityagram approach to Odissi makes use of leg extensions and high leaps which the orthodox community of purists feel are an extension taking liberties with the form as taught by the Gurus. They feel that such robust physicality will dilute the lyricism of Odissi one of its main characters. The point is that the stringent body training that the Nrityagram performers go through gives them a felicity for movements which may look more common to Mayurbhanj *Chhau* but which Odissi dancers with the usual training are not able to accommodate. It has to be said that in dance based on the Jayadeva Ashtapadis for instance, there is no dearth of lyrical grace in the Nrityagram dancers.

The Ensemble has found in musician Raghunath Panigrahi (who after the premature and sudden death of his wife Sanjuktha Panigrahi was at a loose end and found in the Nrityagram's commitment to Odissi shades of Sanjukta's involvement), an ideal music composer. His musical knowledge along with his understanding of Sanskrit and Surupa's own intense creative endeavours find the right alchemy. The Carnatic violin duo, brothers Ganesh-Kumaresh, have also worked composing music for Nrityagram.

Nrityagram's first full length production "Sri – In Search of the Goddess", premiered in Delhi in 2001 and in the United States in 2002-2003, evoked high critical acclaim. *Anshi* was a re-conception of items from a typical Odissi format. "Sacred Space" inspired by temple architecture like that of the Chausat Jogini in Orissa, premiered in Chennai during the Music Academy Festival in December 2005 and was judged the best production of the season. Commissioned by the Joyce Theatre's Stephen and Cathy Weinroth Fund for New Work "Pratima: Reflection" in which the dancer's relationship with the dance is built round the truths of "Creation, Contemplation, Separation and the Duality of the human spirit" premiered in 2008 and Joan Acocella of The New Yorker (12/9/2008) listed *Vibhakti*, a scene from *Pratima*, among the ten best dance performances.

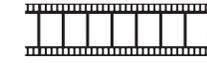
Surupa Sen who has received the Raza Foundation award for excellence in Dance in 2007, the Yagnaraman award from Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in 2008 as Artistic Director and Choreographer carries on tirelessly. Her duet performances with Bijayini provide some of the best Odissi one can see. Their Gita Govinda Ashtapadis have an enthralling lyricism suiting the poetic splendour of these songs. Bijayini who has herself been the recipient of several awards like the Mahari Award (2003), Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2007, the Yagaraman Krishna Gana Sabha award in 2008, Sanskriti award in 2007, has worked very hard on creating new techniques for Odissi dance training. Pavitra Reddy, Rasmi Raj and Manasi Tripathy are the other permanent dancers of the Ensemble.

The dance studio, auditorium, exhibition space, physiotherapy unit are all Lynne's new inductions into Nrityagram. Working throughout the year, it is still a back breaking task keeping the institution going, primarily because of its location which is both a blessing and a drawback, for getting resident musicians and percussionists is never easy. Many dance aspirants who want to be day scholars learning in this institution, find the logistics of to and fro movement too difficult. Nrityagram's outreach programme in the village and city, however, has many students who are benefitted.

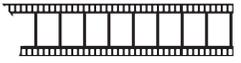
For anybody a stay in Nrityagram is like a dream come true, where Dance and Nature are in close company. Sustaining this dream are very hard working professionals who have dedicated their lives to art and who deserve all the help and encouragement possible. The winner will be Dance and Odissi in particular.

The author is a dance critic.

Source: Leela Venkatraman, *India Perspectives*,



## Films in April



### Sampoorn Ramayan

Sampoorn Ramayan was the first mythological serial shown on the Indian television, created by Dr. Ramanand Sagar. The serial portrays the story of Lord Ram in a most aesthetic manner and carried a lot of devotional value. Sampoorn Ramayan gives a lesson on deep rooted culture of India, traditions and the heritage of pure ethics and principles.

On request by the members of the Indian Cultural Centre in the month of April the Indian Cultural Centre will once again bring to you glimpses of well known Indian classical dance forms through documentaries made by eminent of these art forms.



### Kathakali (with English subtitles)

This 400-year-old, world-renowned classical dance form of Kerala combines facets of ballet, opera, masque and pantomime. Kathakali explicates events and stories from the Indian epics and mythology, with an unparalleled array of colour, music, drama and dance. Theme of the composition is *Kalyanasougandhikam*, a chapter from the epic Mahabharatham, depicts the travails of *Bheema*, who goes in search of 'Sougandhika' flowers at the behest his beloved, *Panchali*. **Troup:** Margi, Thiruvananthapuram, **Artistes:** Inchakadu Ramachandran Pillai, Kalamandalam Ratheesan & Margi Vijayakumar **Vocal:** Kottakal Madhu, Narayanan **Percussion:** Kalanilayam Babu & Krishnadass.



### Bharatha Natyam (with English subtitles)

Sheer poetry in motion, this 2000-year-old classical Indian dance traces its origins to Natyasastra written by sage Bharatha. **Artiste:** Anita Ratnam **Compositions:** Sirulu Minchina, Andal Kouthuvam, Painkili Vannan, Ambika Pallavi, Priye Charuseele & Thillana



### Odissi (with English subtitles)

Born in India's Eastern state of Orissa, this classical dance form can be traced back to the first century B.C. Characterises by its distinct grace and charm, this soft, lyrical dance is most noted for the concept of *Tribhanga* that divides the body into the head, bust and torso. **Artiste:** Sujata Mohapatra **Compositions:** Mangalacharan, Abhinaya & Pallavi

### Kuchipudi (with English subtitles)

Kuchipudi, the enticing classical dance form, has its roots in Kuchelapuram, a sleepy hamlet in Andhra Pradesh, South India. The resplendent charm of this dance lies in its artistic blend of graceful body language and elegant foot work. **Artiste:** Manju Bharggavee **Compositions:** Marakatha Manimaya Chela, Bhamakalaapam & Krishnashabdham



### Mohiniyattam (with English subtitles)

It is the dance of the Mohini, the celestial enchantress of Hindu mythology. Mohiniattam is the female classical solo dance of Kerala, India. **Artiste:** Dr. Deepti Omchery Bhalla **Compositions:** Innu Mama Bhagya Taru, Nritha Prabandham, Papabhaya Haranam & Dundubhi Natyam **Music notations:** Dr. Leela Omchery



### Manipuri (with English subtitles)

A lyrical synthesis of gentle rhythm and delicate grace, Manipuri originates in Manipur, North-east India. Intricate, colourful costume and gentle footwork are the striking features of this dance. **Artiste:** Bimbavati Devi **Compositions:** Nani Churi, Vasant Ras, Dhol Cholom, radha Roop Vaman & Pung Cholom