

The third leg

Indian dancers shine on the world stages but at home, they require the support of a third leg

India has a dance legacy unlike any other country in the world. The proliferation of dance talent among young Indians is astonishing, coupled with a highly structured pedagogy and a growing awareness and appreciation around the world of Bharatanayam, Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Sattriya and Chhau.

And yet, for a nation its size, and with a dance treasure trove as vast as India's, there is a paucity of well-equipped and maintained theatres and studios. International standards of flooring, lighting and sound equipment, trained theater technicians, professional management and funding streams to support non-commercial dance productions and performances are sorely lacking.

To a great extent, the pursuit of advanced studies in Indian dance is accessible only to the moneyed classes. Some scholarships are available to exceptional students who cannot pay, but these are few and far between. Where are the channels of communication with the State and Central government agencies that would change the equation for the dance field? Does Delhi control everything? Is it necessary for artists to build empires with cozy relationships with ministers in order to buy prestige and opportunities; or are there a democratic vehicle and a meritocracy that can support worthy agents of change within the dance field?

The practice of having high level dance performances presented on the basis of 'by invitation only' without appropriate level of ticket tariffs robs the artists of earned revenue, and also self-selects the audience, prohibiting new audiences from attending shows and thereby discovering that they have an appetite for watching dance.

Awards are regularly bought instead of earned; slots in festivals are similarly acquired with a pay-off to the organisers. Talented artists are 'invited' to perform in prestigious festivals if and only if they pay their own way, kiss the feet of the gatekeepers, and worse. Too many gurus hog the stage and compete with their own students and few equip their students with the quality of independence and a roadmap for a successful career.

Indian newspapers of the past used to accord substantial column inches to the coverage of dance. Attention to the non-commercial, high art dance forms is shrinking steadily and although new media is definitely aiding the artists as a free promotional tool, with photos and video clips and commentary being posted frequently, the lack of qualified and ethical critics is a concern. People emerge as critics and writers who have their



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own agenda – self-aggrandisement, ego-building, power-accumulation – and often lack the true and authentic passion for the field and background of scholarship coupled with the poetic/journalistic wordsmithing talent that would render them true champions and explicators of the art form.

Individual artists such as Mallika Sarabhai have been crusaders for change, refusing to adhere to the policy of invitation-only performances, for example. Unnath Hassan Rathnaraju and a circle of young dancers in South India have formed an association to address common challenges, build camaraderie and seek out avenues for change.

There has been a tradition within India of corporate support for the arts. Taj, Oberoi and Park Hotels have provided hospitality sponsorship and partnered with arts organisations to activate creative events, performances and exhibitions. Air India has likewise donated airfare for various arts tours, including Battery Dance's. State Bank of India has often donated funds to local and international arts organisations and sponsored concerts.

But to my knowledge there is not a pattern and campaign to fund the arts by corporates. With the CSR regulations, and the opportunity to include worthy arts and social impact projects within the government-mandated programme, a concerted effort should be made to expand and regularise corporate support for the arts. I believe that dance and music should be incorporated into the school system nationwide, so that talent can be identified and nurtured at an early age.

Finland is a great model of national identity-building through the Arts. Finland parlayed the music of its native son, Jan Sibelius, in order to generate interest in the Finns and Finland as a nation of great music. Music conservatories were built, music was incorporated into the school system, and investment was made in concert halls and festivals that draw large local and international audiences, and differentiate Finland from its neighbours; whereas it was once the poorest country in Scandinavia and the least visible to the rest of the world. Brazil has also been an excellent example of this practice by taxing corporations for funds that are earmarked to support the buildings and operations of an agency called SESC.

I hope I will live to see the day when India leverages its magnificent dancers and dance forms as a magnet for tourism and symbol of a national identity. ♦

The author is co-founder, Indo-American Arts Council, and has been a cultural bridge-builder between India and the US for more than 25 years. He is leading Battery Dance on a multi-city tour of India with support from the ICCR, US Embassy, Air India, State Bank of India and others