

GLOBAL EDITION

## Dance

# In India, Eternal Rhythms Embody a National Spirit



Briana Blasko for The New York Times

Bijayini Satpathy, left, and Pavithra Reddy of the Nrityagram dance ensemble in Karnakata, India.

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### NRITYAGRAM, India

FEB. 20 was President's Day in the United States, but in India it is the day when the god Shiva is honored as Nataraja, Lord of the Cosmic Dance. Innumerable sculptures, going back over at least 11 centuries, depict him balanced on one bent leg. And the placing of each of his limbs signifies a different aspect of his mastery of the elements of existence.

Movement has long pervaded Indian thought. Dance here is a vivid element in religion, mythology, philosophy and art. Although I have spent over 35 years following dance in the West, a four-week visit to India in February made me feel that only now have I witnessed dance where it is truly central to culture.

Nowhere more so than in the disciplined utopia of Nrityagram, a village far from the madding crowd that is completely given over to the pursuit of dance. The village's company, the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, is a lustrous exemplar of Odissi, one of India's classical dance forms. Ever since Nrityagram's first New York season in 1996 at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, no Indian dancers have been better known in America. I stayed in this village for four days, observing round-the-clock rehearsals and classes as the company prepared for its latest tour, which on Tuesday brings it to the Joyce Theater for six days.

The road to Nrityagram (pronounced na-RIT-ya-gram) is an hour's drive west from Bangalore in the state of Karnataka. At one point during my journey a monkey remained seated in the road; the car had to swerve around him. At another, bends in the road revealed trees lighted up by astonishing eruptions of fiery orange flowers; they bear the appropriate name of "Flames of the Forest." In this temperate hill country the dancers and musicians (there is also a writers' colony) are used to working in studios open to the air without doors or windows; their buildings are surrounded by thrilling birdsong and flowering vegetation.

I had only been here an hour when the company's three permanent performers began talking enthusiastically about their several previous tours of America, their visits to the Edinburgh Festival and their time at the Joyce. The company's foreign travels do much to keep the village financially afloat; when the dancers go on a prolonged tour, the school and village simply close their gates. (After its run at the Joyce, the company makes stops in Louisiana, Iowa and Mexico and in April will offer workshops at the Mark Morris Studio in Brooklyn.)

Nrityagram was founded in 1990 as a gurukul, or residential village of learning, by the actress Protima Bedi. Though she died in 1998, her name is constantly invoked here. Her vivid personality and love affairs were one part of her legend, but another was her commitment to Indian classical dance, and in particular Odissi, of which she became by all accounts a compelling exponent. In essence Nrityagram remains as she had hoped: an idyllic place where it is not unusual for people to dance — usually with live musicians — morning, noon, and night.

India has no fewer than eight genres of dance that have been officially deemed classical (as well as innumerable folk forms). The country's complex political and social history, however, brought most of these forms close to extinction by the 1950s. Most of these idioms were connected to female temple dancers known as devadasis, a legendary caste surrounded in moral controversies (some were concubines, some were vowed to chastity, some dwindled into prostitution) and now virtually defunct. Though the classical dance forms today have become well established again, they've been extensively reconstructed — and inevitably altered — during the last century.

Odissi, which came the closest to oblivion, derives from the state of Orissa on India's east coast; Karnataka, including Nrityagram, is southwest and largely inland. As a result a few Orissan purists assert that Nrityagram detaches the dance form from its home culture. The truth, however, is that the village's inception coincided with the worldwide spread of Odissi as a boom dance industry.

What's special about Odissi? Its most distinguishing features are its sensuous shifts of weight (creating a series of S-bend curves primarily at knee, torso, and neck), its rhythmic phrasing and its connection to ancient sculptural depictions of dance. Like many of the traditional dance forms of Southeast Asia it derives from the Natya Shastra, the treatise on the performing arts written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. Three weeks after leaving Nrityagram I saw, in the caves at Udaigiri in Orissa state, the oldest

depiction of Odissi: a striking bas-relief, dating from about the first century A.D., of a female dancer backed by musicians. And the spectacular seventh-century temple at Konark has a Hall of Dance whose bas-relief depictions of dance are another prime source.

Many of these bas-reliefs bear a point-for-point resemblance to the way today's Odissi dancers move. Yet this ancient form is also a new one. Though once its greatest exponents were the devadasis, their art had dwindled largely to music making by the early 20th century. A separate Odissi lineage was (and remains) that of the gotipuas, boys trained until puberty to dance women's roles and to perform acrobatic feats and tableaux (it was startling to see two of these troupes rehearsing in Orissa), and a third Odissi strain was a folk tradition. Core features have been codified only in living memory and are still subject to debate.

Certainly Odissi's range and rich beauties deserve to be called classical. Like several other classical forms in India, it has large capacities both for pure form (nritya) and for poetically dramatic expression (abhinaya). At Nrityagram it's spellbinding, in the abhinaya sections, to watch the dancers' facial mobility and rapt gestural communicativeness.

What is classicism? The question often occurs in India. For Westerners classicism (in dance, but also in music and other arts) is a system of beliefs connecting the human and the ideal. Its external features have undergone Darwinian evolution to often drastic degrees. (Nobody in today's classical ballet would consult pictures of Louis XIV's era for practical guidance.) For the Indians classicism, intimately linked with the spirit of national independence, and also to the pride of individual states, is a way of touching base with a tradition that existed before Western and other colonial invasions.

The production coming to the United States is a joint project, yoking Nrityagram dancers and musicians with a guru, choreographer, drummer and two dancers from the Chitrasena Dance Company from Colombo, Sri Lanka. (The Kandyan dances of Sri Lanka, which the Chitrasena performers practice, form yet another of the many genres of the Indian subcontinent.) The production, called "Samhara," is a remarkably subtle dialogue between the two styles. Both Surupa Sen, the dancer and choreographer who is Nrityagram's artistic director, and her fellow dancer Bijayini Satpathy, director of Nrityagram's Odissi Gurukul, told me that they had encountered no other dance company with which they feel in such harmony as that of Chitrasena. They refer to it as a masculine counterpart to the essentially feminine Odissi style.

The Chitrasena company, like the Nrityagram one, is internationally celebrated. It was founded in Colombo in 1944 by the guru Chitrasena, whose real name was Amaratunga Arachige Maurice Dias; he also founded its school. Chitrasena, who died in 2005, and his wife, Vajira, were renowned dancers; their daughter Upeka, who retired from performance last year, is currently its guru (source of enlightenment) and has been commuting between Colombo and Nrityagram for several months.

At first you wonder why the Nrityagram dancers call the Chitrasena style masculine. The two Sri Lankan dancers involved in this project are remarkably lovely, slender, and long-limbed young women. Soon, however, the difference between their idiom and the Nrityagram one becomes obvious. The Chitrasena women cover much more space than the Odissi dancers, both in the easy vertical lift of their limbs and in their horizontal traveling. They also move their arms, wrists and torsos in different ways; and they show few of the meltingly sensuous horizontal curves that are central to Odissi. They also show facial enthusiasm with broad smiles, whereas the Nrityagram dancers, like most Indian classical stylists, maintain facial composure in passages of pure dance form (while using vividly changing facial expressions in formally expressional sequences).

And where Odissi dancers wear a chain of bells twined three times around the ankle, the Chitrasena dancers wear bronze anklets with internal bells, attached both to ankle and second toe. (It was fascinating later to see such an anklet depicted in a centuries-old sculpture in the temple at Madurai, in the Indian southeast state of Tamil Nadu.) After watching a rehearsal or two I could certainly identify the ways in which the Nrityagram and Chitrasena dancers differ. I could also see where they come close to each other, like a meeting of finely attuned minds. What I couldn't see, however, was where the dancers took anything specific from each other's style. So I asked.

The answer was rhythm. Here, admittedly, the Western ear passes into mystery; Indian and Sri Lankan traditional music customarily uses meters of a complexity that perplexes many trained Western musicians and bewilders most Western dance lovers.

One evening at Nrityagram I watched the two Sri Lankan dancers, Thaji Dias (a granddaughter of Chitrasena) and Mithilani Munasingha, working for hours with their choreographer, Heshma Wignaraja, and with three of the Nrityagram musicians to perfect their rhythmic command of these syllabic dances ("Takateeta deena, Takateeta deena, Takateeta deen" is how one phrase sounds) in Odissi meter. The vocalist and violinist were as involved in the syllables as were the drummer and dancers.

Likewise, at other times the Odissi dancers absorb Sri Lankan rhythm. Watching them at another rehearsal I noted that even a seemingly slow-motion phrase is set to a passage of brisk drumming. It seemed that, within the gradual movement, there was a rapid sequence of minor pulsations, each to be fitted with intense precision into the dance.

A Western observer begins by finding everything in Indian dance "other"; when I first watched it in London in 1980, I thought I had no vocabulary, no frame of reference, for what I saw. What becomes absorbing, however, in Indian dance — not least the Odissi form of Nrityagram — is that it contains multiple othernesses. These Indian dances abound in dualisms: masculine and feminine elements (even within the "feminine" Odissi), sculptural qualities and sinuous transitions, abstract form and mime gesture, motion and repose. The contrasts within the idiom make for endless expressiveness.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: March 25, 2012**

An article last Sunday about the Indian village of Nrityagram, which is completely dedicated to the pursuit of dance, misidentified the theater where the village's troupe, the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, made its New York debut in 1996. It was the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, not the Joyce Theater. The article also misspelled the given name of a Sri Lankan dancer who was observed practicing with the troupe. She is Mithilani Munasingha, not Mithirani.

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