

Dance Matters

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Basant Blooms!

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Come Spring and there's beauty of colours of flowers everywhere. Especially in North India - where after a long winter - this is a welcome change. Living in the garden city of India, we don't even notice it here in Bangalore! There are flowering trees all year round and rather happy people, unlike in rest of India, especially North, where most are crying, complaining all the time despite all they have: good roads, governance, institutions, halls, malls, free facilities and more. Maybe time for a change!

Change comes through discussion and dialogue. Or elections! Delhi election results were astounding: BJP returned to power in the power-city after 27 years. Two term CM Arvind Kejriwal was finally relieved of any chief ministerial duties! It was a churning, a *Manthan*.



Manthan

Manthan day 1 was Saksham Seminar in the basement of HABITAT called Amaltas on solo tradition, Dance Journalism and so on. Manthan Day 2 was performance by 3 at Stein hall and Manthan Day 3 was Workshop. This line up was eclectic: the talkers, walkers and knockers! A mixed bag of events hosted by Kalpataru in its crystal year (15th anniversary is called so).

The talk sessions *Saksham* had potential but were marred by poor content and poorer structure. It also proved most dancers are not speakers, who can articulate coherently and clearly without mumbling. It is the duty of the organiser to keep a handle on time, lest one person dominates, while at the same time holding audience interest together. Even the compere was barely audible.

At Kri's SADI third online edition launch at Amaltas, basement of HABITAT, Mesma Belsare gave a good demo of Maya Kulkarni's Shilpnatanam. Her demo had a soothing quality about it. Stylish too. Basically, Maya's discourse was on how - when she was in her prime dancing career in Bombay of the 1960s to 70s - the focus was more on nritya not natya. So, her attempt was now on

Bharatanatyam postures and language? Maya Kulkarni can be dubbed a *thinking* dancer.

Next was the launch of the third online edition of SADI (no, not Sari but acronym for South Asian Dance Intersections) by Arshiya Sethi and team of academicians like Urmimala Sarkar, Amrit Srinivasan, Anita Cherian where Rama Vaidyanathan, the happening Delhi Bharatanatyam dancer, did the honours as a trustee of Kri, but in the basement of HABITAT there was no network! The links to University of North Carolina, Charlotte, USA, didn't work. No one did a tech check earlier? A young filmmaker Tushar Nongthombam from Manipur shared the realities of creating art in a state torn by political and cultural strife. Following this (or before) was a session on Hierarchies by academician-dancer Aadya Kaktikar of Shiv Nadar University (trained in Orissi by Guru Mayadhar Raut) who talked of evolving GSP - the guru shishya Parampara, and Sumedha Bhattacharya of Jindal University whose photo essay, IMKAAN, created with Hadiyeh Azma, was platformed before a lackluster demo by Shushant Gaurav, who got very less time to develop any real art. His tag "*purana andaz Kathak*" may work in London but in homeland of the art - Delhi darbar - it was just Kathak in vilambit laya! He needs to be seen properly in a full show format, before any of his claims and talent can be assessed in India. Hope someone platforms this unusual Kathak dancer again as he looks different. There's peace in his dance. The organizers compressed too much in too short a session. In the end it was like going to a French restaurant and getting French fries, not a fine dine. The final session had seniors speaking on dance issues (already covered in narthaki by Bibin Balan) like retired university (JNU) talent Urmimala Sarkar and one from Ambedkar University, Anita Cherian sharing their concerns. Teachers generally have well-articulated voices that reach out. In this session, it didn't happen.

Also, as an aside, most Indian universities' dance study departments have failed by and large (an exception being JNU): neither have these produced noteworthy dancers nor academicians of merit or any national standing. In some cases, there is plain plagiarism. Now AI is writing Papers as was seen last month in a prominent university in Gujarat! Then too, collectively or individually, how many books, films or serious Papers on Indian dance have come out of these universities? Amrit Srinivasan was present and she took us back in time with her old world charm and all.



Kaustavi Sarkar

It was the actual dance part that saved the festival. In Kaustavi Sarkar's beautifully etched Shilpnatanam, there was a blossoming of a pleasant art work. Its creator and choreographer Maya Kulkarni has termed it so and explained why she did that. Old wine in a new bottle? Hastas, poses all were based on one classical form or the other - now Orissi, now Bharatanatyam with a few stretches resembling Chhau and eye movements of Kathakali - so there was no new *language* as such.

However, in Kaustavi's dance one saw clarity of poses and emotional range. Her face is her fortune because it shows many emotions seamlessly. She also finishes each stance properly. Maya Kulkarni is a senior Bharatanatyam dancer of yore from Mumbai, who left for the USA long ago and took to academics.



Sangita Chatterjee

Sangita Chatterjee didn't chatter much while conducting the session on solo traditions where Rani Khanam took most of the time and beyond, raising memories of times that have a past and accounting for realities today. She is a first-rate Kathak artiste and choreographer but give a Kathak dancer a mike and then one can test audience patience! Ashok Jain, a Spic-Macay stake holder from Kota, shared his experiences of managing dance music shows in small town India. The last session on Dance Journalism had to rush through and cannot be assessed here as yours truly was also a part of it. The earlier sessions having run longer than human tolerance, the last session suffered for younger dancers to question and get answers. Here too, only the organisers Kalpataru and team are responsible.

Next day - the concluding one of the 3 days gathering - Sangita Chatterjee was a refreshing change that she danced more than she talked. Her Kathak has *theraav*: Repose and calm, rarely seen in 40 age group, who generally want to impress with the hurry and flurry of their material. She has a benign stage presence with clarity of vision. Sangita chose the basant (spring) blooms and all through her performance she shared the dignity and beauty of her Lucknow gharana. A student of senior talent and teacher Bhaswati Mishra, Sangita did full justice to her fare. Live music was such an additive, even if these days most male accompanists keep long hair in the hope that Ustad Zakir Hussain's style and spirit may come in them! Ashish Gangani stood out on pakhawaj as did the singer Shoaib Hasan. Pranshu Chaturlal was comical but played the tabla well. Indeed, India's got lotsa talent.

Sitting next to one was veteran Kathakaar Manjushree Chatterjee (no relation of Sangita!), all of 84 and when Sangita tried to emote Shambhu Maharaj's *Kaun gali gayo Shyam*, it brought many memories back - How one saw Shambhu Maharaj doing it in 1969 at then BKK (Bharatiya Kala Kendra) and how maestro Birju Bhai specially performed at our request for our 1996 shoot of dance series *Taal Mel* for Doordarshan.

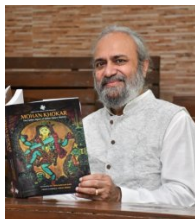
Manthan could've achieved more but was a good attempt. Attendance was poor on all three days, even in the very small basement hall of HABITAT. Failure of the organiser or ennu of Delhi denizens? Young dancers filled the hall - the Rashmi Khannas, Washim Rajas, Vishavdeeps, Gokuls, Leenas, Pradeeps and Rahul Varshneys of the world to listen to the session on dance journalism but didn't get time to interact.



Madhavi Mudgal's ensemble

Delhi's senior Odissi artiste Madhavi Mudgal was last in line of presentation in the 3-day festival. She proved what an excellent choreographer she is, though putting all shapes and size of students on stage affected the overall aesthetics. It is common trend now to give all students a chance to dance but dancer-teachers need to learn the art of editing at every level. Uday Shankar was a genius and famously said, less is more; always leave your audiences wanting more.

Manthan didn't lead to any *amrit* at the end of 3 days. Just a hodge-podge of this and that - quasi academics, one engaging but depressing film, actual dance and some discussion. *Chalo*, art is a *process* not a product, one can say. Hope next time around, better structure with more substance is there. Ache din ayenge!



Critic, connoisseur, historian, author, activist, archivist, administrator and more - editor, columnist and mentor Ashish Khokar remains true to his muse.

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Responses

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I only stayed till the depressing film on Manipur; artistic license should result in art. And art should be aesthetic, and also uplift or elevate, not merely be thought provoking. To start a session on dance with the film was I thought quite inappropriate.

- Shailaja Khanna (Feb 19, 2025)

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Namaste. An elaborate but fascinatingly engaging write up about the three days of Manthan is engrossing. The quintessential fluidity tinged with humour makes the column of Khokarji absolutely delightful to read. It's disturbing to note the dwindling patronage during such eclectic gathering. Hopefully, the churning will lead to welcome flourishing sooner rather than later.

- MV Krishna (Feb 16, 2025)

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Have heard so much about Maya-ji's Shilpanatanam from my Guru. Eagerly waiting to watch the beautiful dancers Mesma and Kaustavi in Mumbai. Have admired Kaustavi's Odissi for many years now!

- Sumana (Feb 14, 2025)

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Perfect overview of the 3-day Manthan event. One potential improvement could have been the addition of more sessions of the talk show, which would have further enhanced the experience for youngsters.

- RV (Feb 15, 2025)

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