

Bharatanatyam: The Language of a Culture  
By Raime Shah-(have Indian background audio)



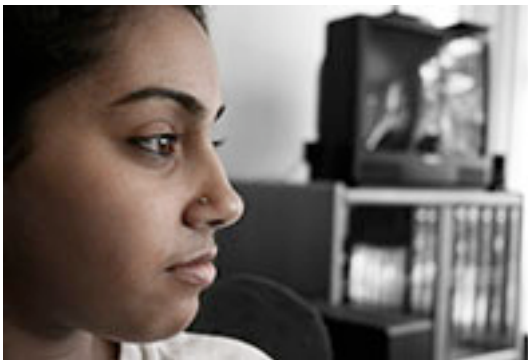
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NARRATOR: Bharatanatyam is a dance form performed now in places all around the world, but it originated in India over a thousand years ago. What about it attracts such a large part of the Indian community? As ancient as it is, the dance has kept the traditions and culture that are so essential intact.



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NARRATOR: To learn more about this culture, I interviewed some of the people who practice it so understand their motivation.



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ESHA: I've been learning since the age of 8.

MALLIKA: -I've been doing it since I was 7.

YASHA: I started Bharatanatyam when I was about 8 years old (layerd/faded) I started to feel more connected to my roots and to my ancestors because I was doing something that they had done thousands of years ago



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NARRATOR: Padma, a mother of one of the girls who practices Bharatanatyam had a very detailed understanding of the dance and its origins.

PADMA: Bharatanatyam is a very ancient art form and most of India's classical dance forms have their origins in this particular book by this person called Bharata, who described..uhm.. dance, drama, and other performing arts in great detail that was written a few thousand years ago. And all dance forms, at least the classical ones are basically variations of the steps described in that. Those books are very detailed. That book.



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PADMA: It tells you every single step, every single action. What expression stands for what. What hand gestures stand for what.



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PADMA: The feet: what the different rhythms are. How many beats you can divide the rhythms into.



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MALLIKA: So basically for each word that's used in all these prayers and songs, there's usually a hand movement along with it. So with practically everything, there's a hand movement for peacock, there's a hand movement for taking and picking up flowers and stuff. There's a hand movement for fruit and stuff. So whenever you're telling a story in expressive pieces, you use those to show what you're doing because you can't use your voice. So people can kind of get an idea of what you're doing when you're using those hand movements.



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PADMA: The specialty of Bharatnatyam is the shapes, the dancers' shapes, when done right: the bodies are very geometric. For example, the feet are turned out, like in ballet almost. And there is a certain position with the knees out, bent, that gives, almost a diamond shape between the feet. And then the arms form triangles as they stand in the typical Bharatnatyam pose of arms on the hips, but it forms triangles.



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And all the movements are not meant to be exceedingly flowing. This one flows, but they tell stories. The body, on the other hand, is under very tight control of the dancer, and again, the geometric shapes...



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MALLIKA: It sets it apart from other Indian dance forms, where it's like very firm, very stiff. Not stiff, but when you dance you have to get everything perfect. Like you can't half do something. Like your arms are always very straight and your sitting in a half bent position and you can't really half do. You have to get it all the way. I think it's different from almost every other dance form, because it's a lot more technical



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PADMA: There are three parts to Bharatanatyam. There is the dance, the pure dance form called Rhytha.



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PADMA: Then there is the expressive part, which is called Abhinaya, where the facial expressions. Even that is codified in this book. As to the different kinds of emotions and expressions that are part of dance.



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PADMA: And then the last part is the drama aspect, which is the Natya. Natya means drama.



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PADMA: So almost always the dancer is telling a story and they are using these three tools. They are using drama, they are using their body, and they are using the facial expressions... But really, these are the key elements to a Bharatanatyam performance.



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PADMA:(1) So basically when you learn Bharatanatyam its like you have learned a language to express feelings, a language, and a story



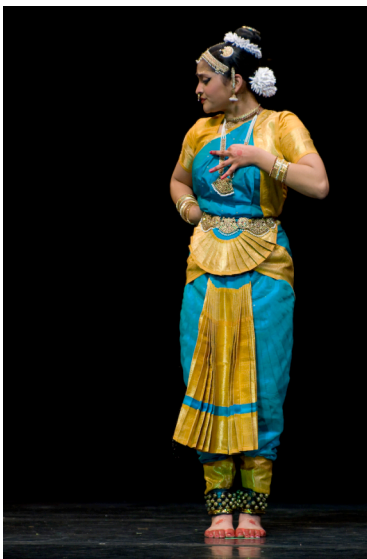


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NARRATOR: why did you do it?

MALLIKA: its fun...Somewhat. It's challenging. And you can push yourself and its a better way of exercise instead of running. Because I don't like running. You get a lot of physical exercise from it because it strengthens everything. Cause every single move has...its very hard.

YASHA: basically I joined because one of my friends joined and I didn't really have anything better to do at that point in my life.



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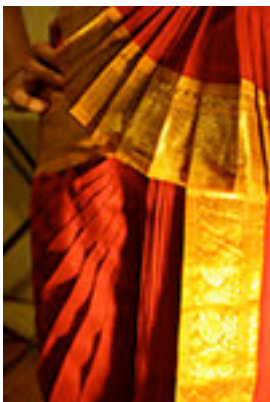
YASHA: But as we kept learning new pieces and the teacher started to tell us how each song was related to different parts of our heritage like the various gods like shiva and krishna.



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MALLIKA:

Since I started learning, I've met alot more people around this area through dance and other indian things. Cause alot of people do it to keep up the indian culture, so alot of people in this area do it so they can keep it up.



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MALLIKA:well when they first start out, its usually the parents telling them oh yea you have to learn dance to keep up our culture. But usually when you start learning, its just something my mom is putting me I its usually their parents,



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MALLIKA: but after a while you start to appreciate the dance form and then you do a lot; you appreciate it more, so then you realize why it's so beautiful and you try to put more effort into it.



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MALLIKA: Like its not something you're forced into, so you start to like it and appreciate it more.



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NARRATOR: What's an Arengetrum?

YASHA: this major debut performance, solo debut performance called the Arengetrum. That's basically where you dance for four hours straight, well you get 15 min. break in between, but you dance for 4 hours straight in front of all your relatives, all your friends, and they basically get to see the culmination of everything you've learned over the past.



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MALLIKA: An Arengetrum is like the beginning of your performing. its the end of the basic learning part. Like you've learned how to use the Abhinaya, the acting part, and you know your rytha, which is all the footwork. So you know all the basics.



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NARRATOR: How long do people usually practice before their Arengetrum?

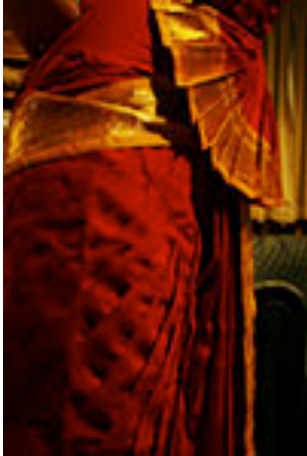
YASHA: for me it was i think 8 years

MALLIKA: Usually after 8-11 years, long time. It's usually like when you're early to build stamina.



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So after your Arengetrum it kinda is like you're ready to perform on stage more and you can choreograph and basically you have all the basic knowledge you need to perform. And that's your first formal solo performance.



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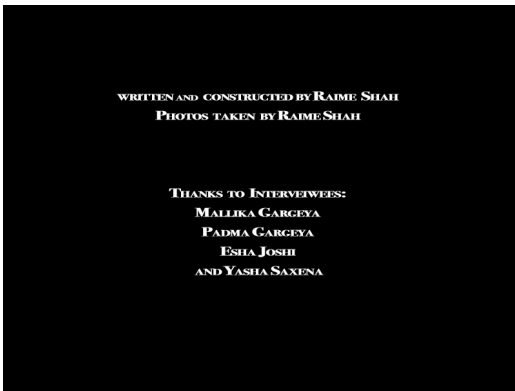
YASHA: And not to mention that its also a beautiful art form that many people, not just indian people, but all kinds of people can appreciate because dance is a beautiful way to express love.



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