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## MISSION CULTURE: HOW ANANDA SHANKAR JAYANT THINKS BIG FOR BHARAT

**Dr Ananda Shankar Jayant** has been an achiever in the worlds of administration, academics, and arts, with equal ease. An eminent dancer, choreographer and dance scholar, Ananda was conferred the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar for Bharatanatyam in 2009.

Her tryst with cancer made her a fighter and winner. Since she is a hard task master, her disciplined approach to this fight with cancer eventually helped her get back on the stage. Her TED talk (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8cm5YPvo3c>) has been ranked as one of the 12 incredible TED talks on the subject by the *Huffington Post*. She was invited to speak at the Harvard Business School for the Inspire Series of the India Conference at Harvard, and was recently interviewed on BBC World Service Radio for the programme – *The Conversation*.

Harnessing technology for arts, Ananda has conceptualised and created Natyarambha, a first of its kind digital arts initiative that brings together tradition and technology. This Bharatanatyam practice app was launched recently.

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She shares her thoughts in an interaction with **Usha RK** on form and format of classical dances in India; on creating an economy for performing arts, and on how the government should revisit its financial allocations and priorities to nurture the arts.

### ***What are your views on “baanis” or traditional schools?***

Art is a river that brings various influences to its eternal flow. Artistes take from this river, even as we leave a little of ourselves into that eternal flow.

*Baanis* or *gharanas* have evolved over centuries of practice by many generations of artistes. Some elements, for example Bharatanatyam or Kathak, are embellished and polished by one *baani*, while others, highlighted in another *baani*. This is not to say that all essential elements of the particular style do not exist, but any one or two aspects are more highlighted. That element goes on to become the signature of the *baani*.

All classical styles have a methodology of grammar, a design of the form, a pattern for the content, a presentation format and a musical genre that accompanies the dance, all evolved over centuries, even as it was wrung out to its present arrangement by dedicated *gurus* and artistes.

So, there is a set visual optic, supported by aural, poetic and musical styles; the essence and chosen highlights of the style define a *bani* or *gharana*. If one *baani* focuses more, on say, *nritta* or pure dance, it does not mean that there is no expression there. It is probably there, albeit in a small percentage. Similarly, maybe one style focuses more on the *lasya anga*, even as it does not reduce the grammar or idiom.

In short, I would call *baani* a creation of many minds, bodies, and aesthetics, that today gives us a benchmark for identification and framing of an artist. Yet, *bani*s are constantly evolving, in flux, as today's artists bring their own learning, understanding and themselves to the art form. Even in an institutional kind of learning, one can see these individual traits in a group of teachers and learners.

*Baanis* are identities that have always allowed for innovations, inclusions and changes towards finesse, while retaining their individuality that helped create their image.

### ***Why are form and format important?***

Form is, again, essentially the grammar, idiom, and content, while format is the presentation. Every style of dance has these. In some styles, for example Bharatanatyam, the format of presentation, the *margam* has been laid out for a solo performance, keeping in mind the time, and age when this was laid down. Over the years, artists and gurus have made inclusions in the format to present their own artistry, space and time of the performance.

Today, we really have come a long way from that early *margam* in Bharatanatyam. Earlier, there was the luxury of time. But, now, with the paucity of time, a capsule is what we can present in a *margam* performance. I believe that the idea of a *margam* is that of a *margadarshak*, that helps one structure the presentation format.

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In case of the form, because of a wide exposure to other styles today, one can see a cross pollination of grammar from other styles. I have been witness to quintessentially Kuchipudi and Odissi movements and *adavus* patchworked onto the Bharatanatyam tapestry. Even a Kathak-like footwork in Bharatanatyam. The ubiquitous splits have enamoured many young dancers today. Splits in a Bharatanatyam costume! It confuses me on so many levels.

In India, we have a plethora of classical styles. We, as artistes, need to maintain the framework, integrity and essentials of a particular style. Else, we may leave the students and researchers confused. How could one retain the individual identity if it is challenged by being addressed by different names or identities?

### ***How should teachers tackle the influences?***

Most teachers and gurus are already wary of the many influences that a student is today privy to. I notice gurus maintaining the integrity of the style while teaching students. In fact, teachers, today, who have inherited a form practised by their own gurus, are maintaining it with their own inputs, keeping the pristine qualities intact. That's probably the reason why we still see traces of the uniqueness of the traditional schools.

The way forward for young dancers and choreographers is to engage with the chosen art in depth, to understand the core and philosophy of the art, to be able to grow from a performance into artistry. Cloning or copying will not allow for self development and it could eventually result in contributing to the style itself.

### ***What do the dance fraternity, the government, founders and sponsors need to do to effectively bring policy changes in the areas of funding, management, impresarios, venues, allied skills and training that will create business opportunities?***

I have always been vociferously speaking for Cultural Social Responsibility (CSR). While films and sports get great support from corporates, this does not hold true for performing arts. Seeking a return on their marketing budgets, their natural choice is in the TRPs and the numbers. Classical arts cannot compete.

We need to look at culture and arts beyond saleability, TRPs, or returns on investment. What is needed — corporate to look at arts sponsorship, not through the prism of returns, but through the prism of nurturing the society, saving our art forms for posterity and helping carry forward this culture to our future generations, who in turn, under such influences, will grow to be better citizens. Every company spends over 20-40 years to build an image or carve a niche for themselves vis-a-vis good governance and a clean financial image. The stars, with their pristine heritage, compliment and translate to the company, the inherent image of the arts. Yes, the results are intangible, but are far reaching, powerful and proven.

Employment: Cultural quotas in government jobs at the clerical cadre are mandatory, and some ministries follow this, but these efforts are still negligible. While a sportsperson on a sports quota is encouraged to pursue the chosen sport, the same is not the case for cultural quotas. In the absence of medals and cups that sportsmen bring to the institution, the cultural quota artiste is reduced to being a mere entertainer at official and semi-official house events. We need to take a hard look at

the cultural quota selections and how the system supports them. For every sector or industry, there is a specific course in civil services, but not for culture. We don't have specialised training or technical studies in this sector, and so, we make do with officials from other sectors. A sensitive and highly-specialised sector like culture, which deals with the finest of arts, needs people with sufficient and appropriate knowledge. We have been just "managing" till now. On the eve of India at 70, the Government of India should take this step forward and take an initiative to announce the civil service course for this specialised sector.

Venues: Why is it that in India we have so few venues, especially well-equipped venues? Why, as we expand our cities, with more and more malls or urban entertainment centres, is it so difficult to mandate that every mall approval be given only if a small performance theatre is added? Why not a small auditorium when we can have multiplexes in malls? Can't our urban planning authorities mandate a compulsory auditorium or community space in residential colonies?

Media: There was a time when a review in the newspapers mattered, but now with the Internet, there is an abundant democracy of websites, blogs, and writers, who are catering to a new readership. Yes, here too, an increase in the presence of art-related matters is most welcome. Films find live reviews in the weekly round-up programmes on all news channels, programmes dedicated to the coverage of classical arts are few and far between on Indian television, except Doordarshan. Even there, the national programme of dance and music on Doordarshan is telecast at a very late hour, and the arts and culture dedicated channel DD Bharati does not indulge in content creation, but airs or telecasts programmes recorded for other DD channels. The I&B Ministry can look at making it a profitable venture, so that the investment on good programming takes the channel to better heights and improves the bottom line.

### ***What are your recommendations to government vis-a-vis culture?***

Bring the arts back into the school curriculum — not as extracurricular activities, but as core subjects. This will help in the learning process. Arts make for extraordinary tools for early learning. Music to teach fractions. Tabla or mridangam or konakkol for math. Bharatanatyam for architecture. Kathak for spatial understanding. Art training improves motor skills, communication, peer networks, helps in the development of the right brain and in cross pollination of ideas. While learning a single composition in music or dance, the student has to learn or know its historical significance, its geographical presence, the biography of the composer, the concept or philosophy he is trying to convey, mythological reference if any etc. The learning benefits are unmatched.

### ***Why should arts be integral part of formal education and how can this be achieved?***

As a nation and a civil society, it is imperative to invest in the arts and in culture. It is culture that defines who we are as individuals and as a nation, and every child must have the right of this access to culture. How will the young embrace music, dance, sculpture, and painting if they are not taught in schools? What will they spend their bank balances on when they grow up if they are not even exposed to it?

Today, with India at inflection point, we can nurture culture and creativity, not as a selective marketable money churning culture, but nourish every art, popular or otherwise, and create a mechanism to support this cultural understanding and education in schools and colleges. More

importantly, art engagement assists in comprehension of ethics, morals and values needed in the pressure cooker life we all lead. The early engagement also helps the young find and channelise innate talents and overcome negativity.

***Do you have questions that can help formulate a plan of action?***

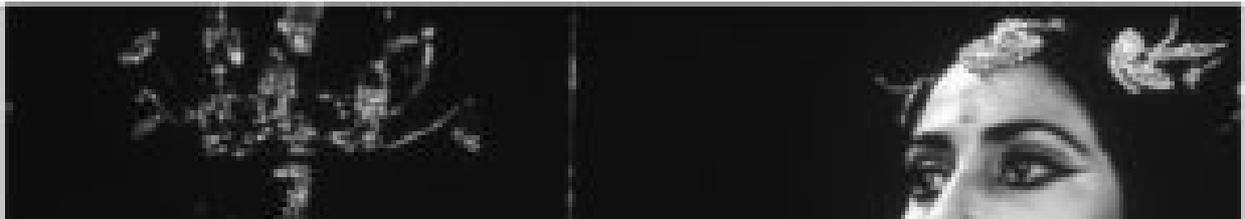
India, with its incredible diversity of arts and culture, is blessed with the strongest and most enduring tools of soft power. Questions emerge like the rising Brahmaputra. Does the government feel the responsibility? Are they willing to take steps to carve the path for the ensuing generations? This is not just for the Ministry of Culture to face, but the HRD Ministry (education), Finance, External Affairs (export of arts and allied fields), Niti Aayog or the Planning Commission and so on, too.

- Can arts, too, be supported and funded by a cess and aspire for a Swachh Bharat like cess?
- Can arts be integral part of education and not an extra curricular activity?
- Can arts be treated as MSME?
- Can every development project also include arts infrastructure, across the countryside, at cities, and district level?
- Can the arts, too, aspire for a robust arts quota, much like sports quota in government and PSU organisations? This will give teeth to the arts training, as it will provide a semblance of employment too.
- Can we take the onus of bringing back into the conscience of the nation, culture — as a prime mover and a civilisation marker?
- Can CSR also include Cultural Social Responsibility? Can we commit to Cultural Social Responsibility?

Yes, it is a long list, but entirely possible for a plan of action to emerge to harness our nation's immense and enormous soft power strengths.



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