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Baby steps into digital dreams

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 18th February 2017 10:00 PM | Last Updated: 18th February 2017 07:54 AM | A+ A A- | Print icon



Mastery of any performing art demands dedication and practice

India's wealth of performing arts has attracted learners and practitioners from across the globe. Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi have now become universal styles, with dancers of almost all nationalities and faiths embracing and learning the art in the quintessential guru-shishya parampara, unique to India. Learning from a guru is paramount in any performing art. Having learnt dance basics from stalwart gurus six days a week, hands-on training and learning by way of observation and osmosis is irreplaceable. Mastery of any performing art demands dedication, besides regular and extensive practice.

As a classical dancer, practice has been a constant companion in my life. Practice is also the one word I use most as a Bharatanatyam teacher for young students as well as established performers. It is the constant early training of one's body into the movement technique of a particular dance style that enables young learners to move from technique and grammar towards grace and beauty. An early life training that holds one in good stead many decades later! The body does need to toe the line, pun intended! And that can only come with three things: practice, practice and practice.

As my Guru Rukmini Devi said, "We dance with our bodies, but we finally forget them and transform them, and rise above the body. That's when poetry and magic happen."

Everyday, thousands of students train with gurus. In today's fast-paced life, training classes in Bharatanatyam by a guru is only feasible for a few hours a week. Practising at home is very essential. Many students find this difficult for want of guidance at home, leading to delayed learning or even unlearning, and loss of interest. The impulses of today's world are way too different from the universe we were born into. We wake up to breathe and live, to be surrounded and immersed by technology, an inflection point in mankind's history and its embrace of technology. Our access to performing arts too is now driven by technology. Viewing and watching performing arts is making a noticeable shift to our devices, enabling and mediating arts in more ways than we can imagine.

"Our future will be technology driven. We will need to embrace it," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi. And yet, in the world of Indian performing arts, technology interfaces mostly at the final output, by way of soundscape and light design in imaginative and spectacular presentations.

A clutch of archaic training DVDs, YouTube videos and Skype form the outer perimeter of arts embracing technology. And it got me thinking, can we leverage technology to accentuate classroom learning of classical dance? Can technology ease the process of retention, and rehearsal of dance basics taught by a guru? How can a young student be inspired to practice at home? And of this enquiry was born Natyarambha, a web-based arts education initiative, to facilitate an engaging 'practice dance at home' option to help bridge the gap between classroom training and home rehearsals—a first of its kind Bharatanatyam digital practice option. Like the first adavu or step, Natyarambha enables classical dance take baby steps into India's digital dream.

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