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Nrityagram

India's Traditional Dance Gurukula Thrives in the Karnataka Foothills

This is the story of a woman in love-with dance, with dedication with a dream. Thirty kilometers outside Bangalore, Odissi dancer Protima Gauri Bedi- vivacious mother of film throb Pooja Bedi and son Siddhartha-has, at mid-life, given birth again, to Nrityagram, "Dance Village." In India it takes quite a siddhi to get called a miracle-maker, but Protima has won such a title. Cynics who looked askance at Bombay's socialite beauty turned dancer erecting a dance village out of a snake-infested patch of desert now confess, "Yes, she's done a bit of magic."

Nrityagram, now four-years-old-the birth was officially attended in May 11th, 1990 by then Prime Minister of India V. P. Singh-is Protima's protest of a commercialism that has all but anesthetized the vital pranas of India's dance traditions. Great but increasingly grasping dance gurus charge premium prices to train dilletantes more interested in premature arangetrams than greatness.

Nrityagram is a brazen return to an old formula-student lives with teacher/family, serves them. In turn, maestro teaches student with the love of a parent-for free. Nrityagram is free. In India, today, that alone is miracle stuff.

At Nrityagram aesthetic purity is an imperative. Plastics are taboo, as are other pseudo-building materials that mock India's native architectural styles. Buildings are out of a Vedic storybook-rough-hewn granite, stone boulders, mud and thatch. Bricks are eco-consciously soil-compressed and sun-baked to save the trees that a kiln method would devour. The look is rustic elegance.

Twenty-two boys and girls from all over India now reside there. Some ran away

from families as far away as Bengal and abandoned promising educations just to be at Nrityagram. Many couldn't even speak the local language! Though "no rules" is the strictest rule, and a symbol of Nrityagram's anti-institutional tenor, the dance artists follow a demanding regimen-rise with the roosters, meditation, mantra, japa, puja and hatha yoga. Then dance classes, theory, choreography, music, Indian literature, Sanskrit, poetry and much more. All do farming in the late afternoon. After only three years, this little inspired band has already molded themselves into a troupe of distinction, performing both in India and America.

The full robust vision is to make Nrityagram a plexus of India's seven dance traditions (three are now represented) with the best gurus of each. But everything awaits funding. Protima is teased that she is India's most incorrigible beggar. She would laugh, agree and then complain that those with the means have not been more generous. Still, day by day there is new growth, inspiration and accomplishment. "I am fearless," she says. "I am doing my Dharma." (Part II next month.)

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