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Published by Anonymous on Mar. 02, 1995

Nippon Shakti

Classical to magical, energy is her art

Tokyo. Dusk. Elevators lower a dense, dark-suited mass of weary businessmen down from the sky. They pour onto the streets, fan out and disappear into five thousand quaint, noisy, lantern-festooned, bamboo-latticed, family-owned, after-hours watering holes to unwind. Meanwhile, eight young Japanese women, their normal work day also over, converge at Shakti's Vasant Mala School of Dance for evening practice. Three rigorous hours later-perspiration evaporated during a final 20-minute meditation in full lotus-they catch the last subway home. Five days a week.

Reported by Vikas Adhopia, Kyoto

Half-Indian, half-Japanese, 37-year-old Shakti is still not tired. "It's so quiet around midnight. This is when I really meditate." She reposes on the floor, her ankle-length hair encircling her. On cue, her six cats appear and seat themselves around her Buddha-like form-personal guardian spirits.

Who is this tireless, meditating, zephyr-like half-Durga/half-Saraswati classical/non-classical Indian dance artist who performs in Buddhist temples, did a rave recital at age 27 at Lincoln Center, New York, dances for heads of state-the late Indira Gandhi and Japan's Imperial family-and holds an MA in Indian philosophy from Columbia University? And what is she doing with an Indian dance school and troupe in a Buddhist/Shinto land anyway?

Let me explain. I met Shakti and her mother, Vasant Mala, at the Kyoto branch of their dance school. They served me Indian tea and told me their story. Shakti's

late father, Dr. Surindra Nath Chakravarty, an English professor, set up the Gandhi Institute in Japan to promote cultural exchange with India. Shakti's Japanese mother-a student of her husband-to-be when they first met-became the first Japanese woman to study Bharatanatyam, tutoring under dance genius Udhay Shankar.

Today, Vasant Mala has about 40 students and gives them a class in Hindu philosophy once a month. Shakti has about 20 students, not counting her troupe members. Nearly all are Japanese. "The Indian kids, unlike the Japanese, are not so serious about it," she laments.

When Shakti first began giving performances, "Nobody was interested." But that's all changed, and she now gives an average of 100 sell-out performances a year around the world, including India, China, France, England and the United States. Some are troupe performances, but most are solo. Her repertoire is as elastic as her leotards-stretching from pure Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Odissi-accompanied by traditional vocal and instruments-tabla, veena, violin, mridangam, flute etc.-to very expressionistic creations accompanied by anything from veena by Balachandar to the shakuhachi, Japanese bamboo flute, and New Age fusion sounds. "But still, every piece has its roots in Hindu philosophy," she insists. "Even my non-classical dance is based on the techniques of classical Indian dance-including breathing, prana, yogic body/mind control-yet it has the freedom and energy that speaks to people today. It's my own new style."

Last December she performed an original piece called Tribute to Nature at the prestigious Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. The mature, conservative audience loved it. So did the critics. Dance critic for the Statesmen wrote: "The audience sat enraptured without batting an eyelid at the eight boneless wonders from Japan... a beautiful and innovative extravaganza."

Married to a Japanese man (they have no children), Shakti's spiritual nadis have remained very Hindu. She keeps a dancing Shiva Nataraja in her kitchen-"right in the middle of my life"-and shares, "My beliefs and everything are Hindu. Even in my classes I don't try to teach just dance, I try to teach the whole concept of Hinduism as a way of life."

One of the most amazing accomplishments of this intrepid artist is getting dance back into the temple-a feat Hindus in India have failed at since they let a puritanical, Anglicized elite throw dance and music out of India's temples where it resided for millennia.

Sidebar: Tokyo Interview

Hinduism Today: What do you feel when you dance?

Shakti: I feel so much alive, yet so much at peace. I feel the whole universe and feel a part of everything at once. Like I can see everything, and into the next dimension. So much totality and harmony. Energy just flows. I keep dancing to communicate that energy to everyone. If people can feel what this energy is, change can happen. This energy changed me. It makes you realize you are part of the universe, the eternal flow.

HT: You dance in Buddhist temples? Isn't that unusual in religiously reserved Japan?

Shakti: Yes, I have danced in over 50 Buddhist temples on the altar in front of the Buddha, in temple grounds, even in the graveyards. They are usually small, private temples, not the temples of the big institutionalized Buddhist organizations like Sokka Gakkai, but of older sects like Zen, Shingon, Tendai-su and Zodo-shu.

Most people who invite me don't want a dance performance. They want an offering. They want a form of energy, so they ask for me alone. At one of the temples, Atagoji in Kyoto, I have danced there every year for the last ten years, on Buddha's birthday. All the worshippers come and we start with a ceremony by the high priest. First I do my greeting to the Buddha on the altar and then turn to the audience. The audience is usually seated on the floor in a half circle. I do one classical Odissi dance, then the priest there, who is a talented composer, plays a synthesizer. From the altar, I dance out into the temple gardens and then dancing between all the little outdoor Buddha shrines off into the forest and mountains. The worshippers, usually about 100, follow me. The music is amplified so I can hear it

even from the mountainside. Sometimes I come back to the temple. Once I continued on up to the top of the mountain.

At the Zengoji temple, the inner sanctum was closed for 200 years. Then two years ago, they had a re-opening and had some traditional Japanese dancing and drumming and asked me to come also. I danced a classical Indian dance for the Amano Goddess.

Interestingly, the Japanese find no contradiction in my dancing Indian dance at Buddhist temples, even when I add a secondary dance of my very modern, liberated, unconservative style. They tell me that they want spiritual energy, joy, brought into the temple. They appreciate the traditional Hindu temple style because it's classical, but also the modern style because it's free, it's today. They figure even Buddha has to live in the 21st century. Even though the costume and technique is different between my classical and modern dances, the energy is the same eternal energy, flowing.

In the beginning when I was dancing along with my mom, it was all traditional odissi and bharata natyam. Gradually, I have become known for my non-traditional style too-sort of, wake up the Buddha! Today we perform all over Japan. Temples call us, schools call and private groups call us. We sponsor one very special new program annually. We have a good following.

HT: Different costumes and music for your modern style?

Shakti: When I perform classical pieces in the Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi or Odissi styles, I wear the traditional costume-flowers in my braided hair, ankle bells, jewelry etc., accompanied by traditional vocal music and instruments-tabla, sitar, violin, harmonium, veena, mridangam, etc. Then if I am also doing my contemporary piece, I change very quickly and reappear in a one-piece costume, very light, very simple, very loose-no stitching, no buttons, no ornaments and very little make-up. The music range is extreme-from Shiv Kumar on the North Indian santoor to totally modern stuff.

HT: Was learning dance your mother's idea or yours?

Shakti: Dance came to me naturally. First, my mom is a dancer, but also, even as a tiny girl, my father taught me yoga, breathing, etc. He would take me places in the countryside and point out each leaf or flower and look at the consciousness of the flower or leaf and see its life, feel it, talk to it, to become one with it. To see a stray cat and become friends with it, see its essence, not be afraid. To look at a cloud and go there, become the cloud. Those were the games we would play. Reach up to the sky and feel it and envelop it. There is nothing to stop you from traveling to the sky, just fear. Of course, he told me what my name, Shakti, meant. At first, he just said "energy" and you have to have that life energy, and use that energy for yourself and for others. And prana-one of the most important words I learned in the beginning. Don't just breath air, he said. Use prana, get that breath, that force, activated. We meditated together in the lotus position from as early as I can remember, even before three years old. It was so easy. It came naturally just sitting beside him, in the mornings and on the weekends. Sometimes we meditated in the botanical gardens. He would take me to India about three times a year. My mother was there training in dance. I would get up early and follow her and move like her. She came back to Japan several times a year too. But when she came back to Japan for good-I was about four-I started formal lessons with her. I never really thought I was dancing or going to be a dancer. It just seemed a natural part of life. You eat, you sleep, you dance. When I was five, we started a dance school out of our home. When I came home from school she gave me classes with two other girls.

Then in my late teens, my father wanted me to study Hindu philosophy, academically, to know it fully so I could even better express it. Learn all the proper Sanskrit terms, etc. To know it in the body is most important, but the words in the books too will make me stronger. At first I thought, "What a waste! I could be dancing, doing what I really want." But once I started it was really fascinating. I would read something really deep and think, "Yes, that's it!" But then listen to lectures and think, "No, no. That's not it. He has it all wrong." He knows it just in words, not in feeling. My thesis was on the concept of the Goddess and dance. I would come back to Japan a few times a year, during schoolbreaks, to give performances.

HT: Despite all you have achieved, you sound like there is still much more in store?

Shakti: I want to revive the Devadasi [Devadasis were Hindu temple dancers] tradition here in Japan. It could be done in this present day. It's the purity in the heart that counts. It doesn't matter where you dance-in temples, on stages, open-air, middle of Tokyo, middle of mountain forests. No difference, the energy is the same. Body is a temple of God so you can never leave sacred ground. I think in my past life I was moving in this same "circle," dancing, and in this life it's just getting stronger. Now I have to focus it 100%, channel it and leave something behind before I die, even if it's not something concrete, but just pure energy, shakti."