

## [She Dances with Devas](#)

Category : [July 1999](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1999

### TRANSITION

## She Dances with Devas

Indrani Rahman (1930-1999), India's cultural ambassador, leaves life's stage

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She had danced before the mighty: Mao Zdong, Zhou Enlai, Queen Elizabeth II, Tito, Kruschev, Eisenhower, Fidel Castro, John F. Kennedy and Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet she also rode a rickshaw into the red light districts of Puri to investigate a neglected dance form known as Odissi--and helped revive it by performing it professionally on stage. Her name signified grace and innovation, and when Indrani Rahman, 68, died of a massive stroke in New York on February 5, 1999, the world of dance lost some of its luster. This distinguished dancer had not only taken Indian classical dance to foreign shores but also made it accessible to connoisseurs and novices alike. An avid teacher, she inspired two generations of dancers, both in India and abroad.

"It is impossible to think of Indrani as being no more, so synonymous with life and energy and creativity she was," wrote India's President K.R. Narayan to Indrani's son, Ram Rahman. "Her understanding of Indian dance and music was as

deep as her rendering of dance was authentic." The letters, the flowers and the phone calls poured in from people in high places as well as the countless young students she had impacted.

Indrani's spunk and vibrancy were not surprising, considering she was the daughter of two strong personalities: Ragini Devi, the legendary American-born dancer who helped pioneer the classical dance revival in India in the 1930s, and Ramalal Bajpai, a freedom fighter and the first President of the India League of America. Born in 1930 in Chennai, Indrani was performing with her mother by the time she was five. Ragini Devi was the first woman to learn the overwhelmingly male Kathakali dance form, and when she took the first Kathakali troupe on tour to Paris in 1939, her little daughter accompanied her. A fascinating account of their travels in the midst of a world war is documented in *Dancing in the Family*, a book by Indrani's daughter Sukanya, to be published this year.

In British India, classical dance had a bad image, and Ragini Devi along with noted dancer Rukmini Devi had helped legitimize the art among upper-class educated women. Studying with noted gurus, Ragini's daughter, Indrani, mastered not one but several classical Indian dance forms, including Bharata Natyam, Mohini Attam, Kuchipudi and Odissi. She was also somewhat of a rebel in her personal life. At age 15, Indrani married Habib Rahman, a Muslim and modern architect and thereafter successfully mixed family life with an international dancing career.

Indrani performed as a soloist and, with her ensemble of

dancers, often traveled as the official Indian Government delegation to countries around the globe. She led cultural troupes to China in the mid-50s and traveled to the US during Jawaharlal Nehru's official visit to Washington, where she danced at a special performance before Nehru, Indira Gandhi, President John Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy.

She was the role model for young dancers and persuaded many a reluctant parent to permit daughters to pursue dance as a career. She did not distinguish between high art and low art and worked to bring attention to neglected forms like Chau and Odissi. She made many innovations in costume, based on the original sculptures in the temples. Her presentations were always full of verve and yet technically perfect.

Anna Kisselgoff, dance critic of The New York Times, says, "She was a popularizer in the best sense. She always had a presentation that spoke to people on various levels. If you were a connoisseur, you could appreciate the fine points of her dancing. On the other hand, she had variety--and in the later years she would provide good program notes for the beginners."

During the last two decades, Indrani performed and taught throughout the US, often with her daughter, Sukanya. In fact, a memorable event for dance lovers was in 1979, when Ragini Devi joined them for a three-generation concert at New York University. Indrani had received the Padma Shri and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in the performing arts and also the Taraknath Das Award. She had taught at New York University, Brooklyn College, The Harvard Summer Dance

Center and was currently on the faculty of the renowned Julliard School of Lincoln Center. Recalls her son Ram Rahman, "She was a great supporter of non-Indians studying Indian dance and music. She believed art is universal and there should not be any boundaries."

Warm and generous in spirit, she promoted emerging artists throughout her life, discovering and encouraging such noted dancers as Pandit Durga Lal, Raja and Radha Reddy and Sonal Mansingh. She knew just about everyone, from the great ustads to young dance students. Artists, writers, dancers and film-makers were all drawn into her circle of friendship.

Indrani continued to present performances by young dancers in New York, not only to gain them recognition but also to familiarize American audiences with Indian classical dance. Her dancers have performed at prestigious locations including Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival and the Ravinia Festival in Chicago.

Ever the evangelist, Indrani pioneered programs consisting of several eight-minute dance numbers so that "people could get converted. Then they are ready for a two-hour solo of Bharat Natyam or Oddisi." Financially, however, these shows were no cash cow. Indeed, for any high art to succeed in America it has to be subsidized by government grants or funding from corporations. In one of her last interviews, Indrani fretted about this sorry state of affairs: "I seem to have no connection with the Goddess Lakshmi [of wealth]--only the Goddess Saraswati [of music and dance] smiles on me--I have no luck getting grants." She berated affluent Indian-Americans for

donating money to build big temples all over America but not supporting her programs to nurture young dancers. She complained, "Why are they not willing to pay for the most exquisite puja, which is Indian classical dance and music?" Indrani's ashes were immersed in the Ganges by Ram in March. He and sister Sukanya have started a foundation in her name to fund scholarships for classical Indian dance and performances by emerging dancers.