

[Culture Wave: Global Youth Movement Spic-Macay In Love With India's Classical Arts and Customs](#)

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Jeans, junk food, Jackson and "heavy metal" are part of the youth scene from Calcutta to Capetown. That's just fact. But for those who feared the guitar had forever banished the veena or that hand-shaking had bullied "Namaskaram" into extinction teen taboo are in for some good news - SPIC MACAY, Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth. It all started back in the early 1970's. India-born Kiran Seth was studying engineering at Columbia University, New York City. Inside its cerebral walls, things weren't much different from his old haunt, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), New Delhi - knotty theorems, blurry-eyed late-night cram sessions and tough profs. But outside was different. Very. No side street Ganesha shrines, no soulful street cows, no twilight satsangs. The wild West raged - music "boom boxes" bigger than suitcases, fast food and plenty of fast living. Like many immigrant students - candid enough to admit it - Kiran relaxed his Hindu harness a little and, in his own words, did some "experimenting." Not for long.

"In 1972, I saw this small ad in the Village Voice about Ustad Amin Dagar's concert. I went. It was one of the most moving experiences of my life. I still remember the song he sang. It was exquisite. Afterwards, I thought, 'this [music] has such fineness and depth, we should do something with it here.'" That seeded that Indian Club which officially metamorphosed into SPIC-MACAY in 1977 when Kiran returned to IIT as a professor. "The idea was not so much Indian classical music but everything that goes with it" - values, religious customs and artistic culture dating back to antiquity.

Today, two decades later, SPIC MACAY has mushroomed into a global circle of students, bonded by a determination to restore a youthful love of their heritage. On

hundreds of campuses in India. SPIC-MACAY is engineering a small cultural revolution, not by pressure but by exposure. SPIC-MACAY/USA emerged in 1989 at Stanford University and quickly spread to 14 top schools such as Princeton, University of Chicago and Berkeley. The "base camp" is the home of SPIC-MACAY's energetic USA coordinator, Rohit Singh. Daily, a flurry of faxes, phone calls and desktop-computer-linked communiques course through his home, linking their international band.

What do they do? A kaleidoscope of projects from dem-lect's (demonstration lectures) to yoga camps - all set to the strict rag, "seva bhavana," selfless service. But the student public knows SPIC-MACAY mostly for their concerts - featuring India's living masters of the classical dance and music traditions. Absolutely free. Kiran explains: "In the Indian tradition, if you give something freely, it in turn will eventually be given to someone else, and so on, and will come back to you many-fold." Less formal, monthly concerts called Bhaitaks span the year. For these, seating is on the floor, or carpeted earth. Music, they feel, is not a show, but a sharing. The floor or earth is not crude, but a refining conduit of oneness.

But student members resist being labeled "concert promoters." They see their work more all-embracingly - promoting the whole rainbow of ancient Indian spirituality. "As students we realized we were missing out on this experience of being Indian. We chose dance and music as the medium to get deeper into this experience," expresses Mukulika Banerjee. But their work is never easy. "The level of appreciation of Indian culture here is lower than I expected," Stanford University and core SPIC-MACAY member Komal Shah confesses. Her friends complain, "Indian music is too esoteric, dated, too ancient." But she isn't discouraged - nor is anyone in SPIC-MACAY. Michael Jackson's wanton wiggles or Deaf Leopard's deafening prattle doesn't rattle this steely crew. They know if they can just get a friend to one of their concerts, the shakti of the artist will do the magic - awaken slumbering Indian sensitivities. They know it works. Most of them were not born tradition-lovers. Even Kiran Seth confesses his teenage mentality: "At IIT's overnight sessions of Indian classical music, we used to go to see the women, sit in the back and play cards, or sleep, but not for the music."

SPIC-MACAY is strictly "of the youth, for the youth and by the youth." Adults are welcome helpers or advisors, but they don't get the reins. As bramacharins, SPIC-MACAY member are full of energy but every shy of funds. Though they do receive a few grants, they lean on caring grihashta businessmen to fill their projects' begging bowls. This is traditional. Part of the grihashta dharma is to support the worthy bramacharin's religious efforts. The students know this.

Despite SPIC-MACAY's chipper student aura, serious professionalism reigns - from the well-known exquisite care accorded guest artists to the meticulous attention to sound system fidelity at every concert. "We're just students" is never an excuse.

Their current and most ambitious program is sponsoring special students to go and live with the great dance and music adepts as in the ancient guru/shishya traditions. "I was sent to Kerala on this program to live with dance guru A. Chakiar for a month. I was so impressed, that when I returned to New Delhi, I became a member of SPIC-MACAY," relates R. Priya.

On the word front, their New Delhi chapter just piloted the first two flights of Eye - a classy art magazine covering dance, drama, music, philosophy, poetry and a noticeable soft spot for the hard ecology/earth issues like deforestation of the Himalayas. Sanskrit slokas, Ajanta frescoes and junior philosophers mix intelligently in its youth-friendly format.

Where SPIC-MACAY really remolds minds year after year is through their uncanny genius at bringing student and super maestro into short, but electric proximity. "The interaction with Pandit Jasraj was a vital experience," confirms Dhanada Mishra, a member of the University of Michigan chapter. Not uncommon is a huddle of girls and boys encircling artists like Bharata Natyam star Sonal Mansingh or sitarist Budhaditya Mukherjee in a dormitory room. Whether learning a new rag or just laughing, in these intimate moments the SPIC-MACAY magic happens. When Westernized Hindu youths look into the eyes of these soulful artists, they see their own roots and a sprawling, 8-thousand-year-old banyan tree of knowledge, the Sanatana Dharma. It's dramatic, feels great and is perhaps the most telling reason why this young SPIC-MACAY family is growing.

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Jasraj

SPIC MACAY had hosted famous Hindustani singer Pandit Jasraj several times. The

master commented on how SPIC MACAY cares for their artists, "Like a rose shielded from the sun, the rain and the wind." We spoke to him recently HINDUISM TODAY: What is special about Indian classical music?

Pandit Jasraj: Indian music gives peace, calmness. It doesn't excite. It comes from the heart. It's not human, it's God's music. This art has lasted thousands of years. Like God, nobody can destroy it.

HT: What do you feel about Michael Jackson's popularity with the youth?

PJ: I don't want to stop youth from listening to Michael Jackson or other [pop] singers. For them, maybe it is their first step toward coming to classical music. Michael Jackson is not an enemy.

HT: On knowing God?

PJ: Soul evolution comes slowly. Sometimes I feel I am very near to God and sometimes vary far. Plenty of times I have felt something is going on inside me beyond explaining. I love all the Gods, but especially I love Ma, Kali. Hinduism is the greatest religion, I think. Nobody can touch it.

HT: What is the Nada Brahma?

PJ: I can sing. I can take you to Nada Brahma. But I don't know which part.

HT: Do you feel you were a musician in other births?

PJ: Yes, we believe it takes four or five births to become a complete musician.

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