

[A Rare Woman Preserves the Arts](#)

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A Rare Woman Preserves the Arts

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A mild fragrance of incense wafts over as you enter the large room of Ms. Kapila Vatsayayan. It transports you into an ambience which must have helped her a great deal in building the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) into an internationally known house of holistic knowledge.

She seems lost in hundreds of files and books piled up almost everywhere in her room. But she keeps emerging from them for profound comments on one subject or another concerning India's cultural heritage. She is 64 but exudes the active energy of a young scholar. She leaves no one in doubt that she is engaged in a work that has been a mission with her for more than 50 years.

What is at the root of the crisis of the human psyche. She explains: "The emergency faced by humankind involves everyone, as the Rio conference on the environment had indicated. It isn't simply an environmental, ecological one, but is rooted in our broken psyche."

Kapila has been worried for years about what she calls "politicization" of dharma almost all over the world. "It is the negative aspect of life that dominates today, and the result of it is the destruction all around," she regrets. "It is the positive aspect of life which, when vigorously pursued, brings joy and happiness." She is confident the IGNCA will contribute a great deal to promoting the needed optimism.

Kapila is today presiding over the IGNCA as its member-secretary. She had

conceived it and laid its foundations in 1987. It is here that she seems to have almost achieved the dream of her life: creation of a place from where she is able to work for the oneness of human society. She tells HINDUISM TODAY: "I have always tried to identify different streams of human consciousness in the world and then project the essence of humanity underlying in the all."

IGNCA was set up in March, 1987, as a memorial to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, former prime minister of India, as she was deeply interested in the arts. The decision was reduced to just two sentences and conveyed to Mrs. Vatsayayan, then working as an advisor in the Ministry of Education, with the direction to draw up a plan for its implementation as she saw fit. In less than five years IGNCA has to its credit thirty-six major publications, five major exhibitions, seventeen international seminars, a microfilm library of 90,000 rare books, 6,000 video films, 1,000 unique slides and an archival collection of 400 unusual pieces of music.

The idea of creating the IGNCA had come to her from what she describes as a "deep study" she has made of India's Upanishadic thoughts which began when she was a young student in Calcutta. What had caught her imagination when she was delving deep into these thoughts was the traditional speculative wisdom, as found in the scriptures of India and other countries, marked by a "cosmocentric approach." It is this characteristic vision of the indigenous people everywhere she believes is based on an "integrated view of man, nature and the universe governed by the cosmic intelligence."

But what makes her hopeful of a solution being found soon is that it is not only traditional wisdom recovering its lost status, but science converging on integral notions of the universe on its own, which are making all intelligent persons realize the truth of interconnectedness. She, however, admits that the solution will be easier to find through the establishment of a "moral order" which helps all of us recognize the "sacred contract that encompasses the relationship between human and non-human beings."

Kapila further admits that the moral order the world needs today should be accompanied by the establishment of a new social and economic order with foundations in spirituality. She is not satisfied merely with our realizing that there is a partnership between man and nature." This is a covenant man has with nature, and it is holy. This is the notion of a cosmic context which allows for the integration of environment and man, science and religion," by which she means dharma, the

immanent and the transcendent as one.

Kapila began her career first as a dancer under the guidance of gurus like Achchan Maharaj in Kathak and Amobi Singh in Manipuri. She became a well-known dancer when she was still very young. She performed in both India and abroad. Her learning of dance created in her an interest in Indology. That took her to Banaras Hindu University where she became the first Ph.D. student in this subject. She won recognition for her dedication to understanding India's culture and traditions when she was awarded Padma Shree by the Government of India in 1990. In these activities, Kapila Vatsayayan has received the guiding benediction of the late Rukmini Devi Arundale and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay - women of great eminence in their own right.

Kapila has been considered a bridge maker between India's North and South, East and West. She introduced artists like Balasaraswati, Shanta Rao, Raman Kutty, Yamini Krishnamurthy to the North and Birju Maharaj, Mahabir Singh and Narender Singh to the South. Author of over 15 books, she is today treated as the leading authority on the interrelationship of the Indian arts. She initiated the external cultural relations program of India with foreign countries. She has helped found many national institutions in the fields of Buddhist studies, especially the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies.

Her multi-disciplinary pursuits and her polyvalent skills culminated in the conceptual plan of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, an institute that encompasses all the arts in their aspects of interdependence and inter-webbing.

Renowned scholar of India, Stella Kramrisch, wrote to Kapila in 1989. "I am overwhelmed by the stupendous vision and organization of the IGNCA. You have done for India the unbelievable service that each civilization is in need of to make this entire world a cosmos of the inner life and mind."

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