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Brave Young Artist Teaches Dance as a Cosmic Art Form for All, Not Just for the Lithe and Lovely

"There was a little girl in my neighborhood, who appeared to be different from other children her age. She walked funnily, talked strangely and her limbs seemed to move far more than she wanted them to. But she smiled just as sweetly, laughed just as joyously and cried just as sorrowfully as other children." So narrates Ambika Kameshwar, founder and director of RASA, Ramana Sunritya Aalayam Trust, recalling its inspired moment of conception. "Who was this little girl? A cerebral palsied child. She used to come and watch keenly where I taught dance class for a group of "normal" girls. Her eyes would move so expressively with each step the normal children took. But the world denied her the universal art of dance. 'She is handicapped,' they would say. 'How can she dance?' 'But she can express herself, can't she?' I would challenge. 'Well then, that is dance!' And so she became a part of my dance class as did many other such children. And that was how RASA was bor." Today over 100 children blissfully gyrate to ancient Indian music rhythms, rapt in the sheer joy of movement, unperturbed that a limb or leg faltered or failed to flex on classical cue.

Begun in September 1989, RASA - officially registered as a "trust to promote cultural awareness" - is already fulfilling Ambika's brave vision to throw open the artistic world to the disadvantaged. Ordinarily the abject discards of society, buried as a hapless governmental statistic, the handicapped girls in RASA reveal the creative expression that can so quickly flower from their seemingly silent worlds. "At RASA [literally 'aesthetically communicated feeling'] we try to overcome the invisible barriers that restrict the universality of dance," Ambika told HINDUISM TODAY in a telephone interview "We already have three dance instructors including myself and three administrative staff." The fledgling academy is financed totally by "big hearts," not grants. "We are on a break-even financial basis. We just manage to receive what we spend. We don't even have enough money to buy all the needed items for the girls. Our staff receives very minimal salaries." Despite the diurnal struggle to make ends meet, she ploughs forward, sometimes running up

bills she implicitly trusts God will cover. Such faith is not thin. God's intimate earthy interplay with man is real to her, dramatized especially by the life of yogic giant Ramana Maharshi, her parents' guru. In fact, RASA links itself to this great seer as the word "Ramana" in the center's name mutely implies.

Much of RASA's instruction is done at other nearby institutions. "We have 'adopted" four girls' schools," Ambika explains. "One is for cerebral palsy, one for the mentally retarded, one for Downs Syndrome and one for the economically backward."

Ambika Kameshwar holds an MA in Sanskrit and is presently working on her PhD. Trained in Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi, she performs regularly in both styles. Additionally, she studied dance therapy for six years at one of the institutions where she now teaches. At age 10, she was initiated into the Rama mantra (sacred chant) by the Shankaracharya of the Sringiri Mutt and performs puja every morning. She is also a Carnatic classical singer and still attends advanced vocal classes - and is married, and has a baby daughter.

Convent Schools and Disco Dancing

Though nearly a full professor herself, she deplores the grossly over-intellectualized education formula-fed to children nowadays. "Being in a country which was for so many years under the influence of the Britishers does not make things easy in term of education," she assesses. "While we have a lot of good Catholic convent schools for girls, we have very few, maybe none at all, special schools which stress more on the wealth of our tradition rather than on the A, B, C's and mathematics. If one can evolve an educational system for our little ones which would make them understand advaita in its true form and understand that everything in this world is one then we would have achieved a right atmosphere for our children to grow up in." Regarding Westernization of the youth, she shares with idealistic liberality, "Though they do have a tendency to forget our traditions, I am not worried about the external aspects of it. It doesn't matter to me if a boy or girl dresses up in Western clothes if in their minds they are directed to the unity of the whole universe. If they can see that, then it doesn't matter if they are dancing in a disco or dancing Bharata Natyam."

And Ambika strictly demands this advaitic vision of herself. "I try to see the glory of the Self everywhere. I try to see God in everything-in the work I do, in the people I meet and in the things I see," she says other her pivotal sadhana reflecting Ramana Maharshi's insight that the jnani sees the Self in all.

Ambika's days are long. But when the Madras sun finally blips into the Bay of Bengal sea, when her "dance daughters" are worn out and husband and child tenderly cared for, she further contemplates the deeper essence of her art: "In the rhythm of nature, there is dance. In the boredom of a king, there is dance. In the despair of an orphan, there is dance. In the joy of a mother, there is dance. In the pride of a father, the peace of the teacher, in the struggle for life, in the joy of survival, there is one common factor, rasanubhavam [essential artistic experience). Dance is deeper than a performing art, much deeper. It's for the handicapped and the not handicapped. It encomzpasses the whole universe."

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