

Young Women Keep The Indian Arts Alive And Well

By Shireen Joanna

Rajdhani Mandir in Chantilly saw yet another music performance this past weekend. Featuring two young Indian women, each talented in their own way, the event drew about hundred people and over \$500 in donations and tickets. First was Ms Sheela Ramanath, a professional Bharatanatyam dancer from Fairfax, Virginia. Part of a group called 'Bharatanjali', Ms Ramanath has been trained in this ancient art form since a child of five.

She says 'Whatever I am now is because of my parents. I owe it all to them.' She moved to the USA two years ago from Bangalore, India with her husband and since then has devoted all her time to performances and teaching of the art. Like almost all artistes of Indian music or dance, she reveres her teacher or Guru Bhanumati who resides in Bangalore and aspires to become like her. 'She is completely devoted to Bharatanatyam,' she says. 'When I lived in India, I used to perform every other day. I miss my teacher now.'

Ms Ramanath is, however, appreciative of the efforts of the Indian community to keep their culture alive in the USA. 'When someone wants to learn a musical instrument or some aspect of Indian dance, it is because

they wish to keep alive the culture of India,' she says. 'And I am very happy to see it so alive in this country.'

Bharatanatyam to her is not just an ancient art form. It takes on a religious meaning. 'Every single part of the body is involved in this dance,' she says. 'It has been around for over three thousand years and will continue to flourish long after we leave. Humans are transient but art is permanent. It is as close as you can get to God.'

No wonder that with this kind of devotion, Ms Ramanath has risen to fame at the age of 26, having already a hundred shows in the USA and the United Kingdom behind her. Rohini Ravada a twenty-year old major at George Mason University was the other star of Sunday's performance. Now living in Centerville, she was born and raised in India till the age of fourteen and sings Carnatic (South Indian classical) music in her native language Telugu, in Hindi and sometimes in Tamil. When she moved with her family to Houston, Texas six years ago, she found a vibrant community of Indian music lovers and an appreciative audience for Carnatic music.

Her career saw a high point with the release of her first music CD in Telugu with four songs at the age of

16. Since then there has been no looking back. With eight major performances to her credit, she presently trains with Mrs. Maragadam Ramaswamy of the 'Ragamallika' fame and has been learning from her for two years. Ms Ravada echoes Ms Ramanath's almost religious zeal for art, especially of the Indian form. "As long as there are people like me who are passionate about music, it will never die," she says. "Both Western and Indian music have the same base of seven notes. Indian classical music is not so different from western. My American friends like it. It has broadened their horizon."

Apart from being an exponent of Carnatic music, she also sings Ghazals, movie songs and any light Indian music. In this post-modern, post-cold war, ultra-technological age in which the great and varied tradition of Western culture, the child of Hellenism and Hebraism, has failed to provide succor and a lasting vision for the troubled children of today, it is heartening to hear of young people like Ms Ramanath and Ms Ravada who have drawn from and been shaped by an exotic, largely un-western culture that has been kept alive and regenerated through seventy centuries, and that we now know as 'Indian.'

All-Night Vigil On Mahashivaratri At Fairfax

By Shireen Joanna

Hindu Indians across Fairfax gathered at temples and kept awake all night, pouring milk and rose water on the idol of Shiva in honor of Mahashivaratri on March 2nd. The name means 'the night of Shiva' with the ceremony essentially taking place at night and like almost all Hindu festivals, has ancient roots. Observed in honor of Lord Shiva whom the Dakshinamurti Upanishad (an ancient Hindu text) describes as the 'Lord sitting cross-legged whose hair is matted and adorned with the shining crescent moon, whose body is white as milk and who has three eyes', it is a moveable festival on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of the lunar month of Phalgun.

The Upanishad description is similar to the figures of the Mohenjodaro and the Harappa seals of ancient civilizations. Shiva - the word meaning auspicious - is also considered one of the Hindu Trinity along with Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Preserver.

For the people who gathered in Chantilly's Rajdhani Mandir however, celebrating their devotion was more important than recalling details of legend and

myth. The Mandir held a two-day event beginning Saturday and going on uptill Sunday morning. Many regular temple-goers observed a fast, some abstaining from even water. On the evening of the 2nd, people kept vigil all night in what is known as 'Jaagaran'.

Apart from the temple's permanent Shiva Lingam, a temporary one was installed and worshipped through the night. The story of the Lingam can be traced to the 'Vedas'. Since time is invisible and formless, the God Shiva according to the Vedas, manifested himself as 'Lingam' to make mankind aware of the presence of Eternal Time. The day of this appearance is what is celebrated as 'Mahashivaratri' and since then the Lingam has been worshipped as the power behind all creation.

While the 'Mantra Om Namah Shivaya' chants went on unabated people poured milk on the Lingam and washed it every three hours with curd, honey and rose water. 'Bael' leaves, considered sacred (because the goddess Lakshmi is believed to reside in them) were offered to the Lingam. The temple's chief priest Pandit Amar Nath Ji led the evening pujas and the Mandir re-

mained open all night to perform Prahar Poojas with people chanting and praying. Resident Priest Ram Sneh Tripathi performed specific Archanas and Pandit Krishnamurthy Jois led the hymns in praise of Lord Shiva.

The 'Shiva Mahimna Stotra' of 'Pushpadanta' and 'Shiva Tandava Stotra' were sung with great fervor. People repeated the 'Panchakshara Mantra' and the 'Om Namah Shivaya', reiterating the Hindu's belief that uttering the names of Shiva with perfect concentration during Shivaratri would free one from all sin and liberate one from the wheel of births and deaths. Prasad, milk, fruits and sweet rice were offered to the devotees during the entire two-day event.

According to a volunteer at the Mandir, close to a thousand people visited during the two-day celebrations that ended on the evening of March 3rd. In Fairfax Station, the Durga Temple too held pujas and similar celebrations from 7:00 a.m. Saturday to early Sunday morning. On the evening of March 3rd, the Durga temple ended the festivities with a special puja and a 'Bhajan Kirtan'.

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