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Bharat beckons me...

Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani (Ammaji) is now a name in Pondicherry that is well recognized with the Indian arts of Bharatanatyam and Yoga. It is interesting that an American by birth found her home here in Pondicherry, India and that she has been highly instrumental in taking these Indian art forms to Indians themselves. Having been one of those beneficiaries myself, her dedication in keeping up the spirit of these practices, her magical touch to the Bharatanatyam dance dramas, her intense training (rather drilling) fun filled sessions, her adherence to Indian ritual and customs have been quite inspiring. Excerpts from a free-wheeling interview with Ammaji...

- Lakhmi Dhanraj

1. A certain mental image about India would have brought you here all the way from the USA. Did it change after you came here?

Actually, when I was a child in the 1940’s - 1950’s, no one even knew where India was! A long sabbatical from my Gradate Assistantship in my PhD programme enabled me and a friend to travel to Europe. There were many young travelers in those days, a few had gone to India and brought back tales of dust, dirt, heat and diarrhea! Due to much Karmic acrobatics, a small book landed in my hands during my six months stay on the lovely island of Crete. The title was ‘Teach Yourself Yoga’. From the first page where I read, “What is That, knowing which we shall know all” and “Yoga is expanding individual consciousness to cosmic consciousness”, I was hooked. It was not India so much, as Yoga which pulled me on that long overland journey to Bharat! But the closer I got to
India, the happier I felt! When I crossed over the Pakistan border in 1967 and set foot on Indian soil for the first time, I knew I had ‘come home’.

2. Does Pondicherry mirror your life in any way? If yes, how?

Pondicherry mirrors my life perhaps mainly because it radiates the powers of the many Siddhas who settled here. It is small, yet totally cosmopolitan! It has for one, the most beautiful seashore. I have literally grown up here for 45 years! The city is filled with spiritual seekers and everywhere I go, I meet students of mine... in dance, in Yoga. I have seen two generations mature here and have shared in and witnessed and participated in their growth and lives. The city and I have ‘grown in Yoga and dance’ together!

3. The last few decades have brought tremendous changes all over the world, how do you think India’s culture has changed?

Indian culture (Samskrithi) has not changed. How can it? It is Sanathana. It is eternal! But its manifestation, like all manifestations, is getting old. It is in decay. The outward form has decayed! But, the spirit of Bharat Mata, the Samskrithi, is there. Sensitive souls may access that spirit and seek her blessings! She manifests now, here and there, whenever a sincere soul – An Adi Karin– a fit person approaches her with humility and reverence!

4. No matter how much one ‘Indianizes’ oneself, the white skin does generate an anti Indian perception. How do you see it?

Indians are the most colour conscious race on earth. I think this psyche has been conditioned through millennia to experience the first perception of the other through the colour of skin. Skin colour determines caste! Skin colour
determines class! Skin colour determines beauty! How many thousands of times have I heard my Indian brethren describe another, fellow Indian as ‘that black fellow’ or ‘white one’. It is, as they say in psychology, “The Unsafe Stranger Quirk” - the need to identify the ‘stranger’ as friend or foe, asset or threat! It is a primordial response! This skin colour is truly the ‘first wall’ over which communication must jump! It has hurt me in the past to be perceived as such (for better or worse). Now having said all of that, I must also say most emphatically that I have received nothing but love, affection and respect from my Indian people and it has been my privilege and joy to live and work with them.

5. The Indian culture has powerful tools embedded in it to build strong, loving and stable individuals and family units in addition to social and spiritual skills. Can you elaborate on your experience in this regard?

As a teacher, writer, lecturer, administrator and creative artist, I have worked closely with people of all nations, colours, religions, classes and castes. Calling on my 45 years
of experience, I would say, for all of our defects, our Indian people are the most stable mentally and emotionally. The family structure in India is based on strong values which are rooted in the principles implied in Dharma. Certain behaviour and responsibilities are expected and there can be no excuse for not fulfilling one’s Dharma even at great personal sacrifice. This is the “key stone” of the culture’s edifice. Though the culture has been, is being eroded, still the structure stands, though it wobbles! A stable family creates a stable individual. In the West, there is hardly any normal family structure, and children are literally left to bring up themselves.

6. If India can benefit by imbibing something from the US culture what can it be?

Yes! Ironically there is much to learn from the West – especially its dedication to quality of work! We do not seem to have any ‘work ethic’ here! No one really cares much. Everyone “manages” and “adjusts”. Just take a look at the condition of our roads if you what to know what India lacks!

7. What do you wish for India?

India should blend the best of ancient values with the best of the values of the new emerging realities.

Ammaji, Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani is Director and Ashram Acharya of ICYER at Ananda Ashram, and Yoganjali Natyalayam, Pondicherry. An internationally acclaimed expert on Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga (Gitananda Yoga), she has lived a ‘life of Yoga’ for the past 45 years.