



NEWS LETTER

PUNARJJANI BHARAT

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Culture: A nation's identity

EDITORIAL BIBIN BALAN

Here, the Punarjjani Cultural Centre starts a new chapter. Culture must not be forgotten, but rather remembered. We're starting a venture with the intention of preserving our culture by enhancing knowledge on various digital media platforms.

Cultural art forms are like windows into our very own history and the whims of those who were a part of it. If we are to preserve them then we must think, imagine and live it. Otherwise, we must prepare to lose our heritage at a rapid pace, to neglect our roots and evolve to a modernity without identity. It would be ironic if these ancient traditions, about which we know so little now, were to vanish before we had a chance to hear these stories.

Finding resources of information and the stories behind an art form is a humongous task. But to create awareness and spread them across should be seen as a duty as we are part of this beautiful culture. There are many reasons we can point out to establish the fact that the culture and the art forms are facing neglect in the whole country. The most common reason is the lesser audience of classical, folk and tribal art forms. People tend to prefer to watch and enjoy any art forms that are easy to understand. Our school education system fails to include art education to understand and accept our own cultural art forms in the curriculum. That can be because of the difficulty in understanding the story behind them or lesser resources of information.

Since we live in an information age, we decided to make this information available digitally to anyone around the world to create opportunities, to learn about ancient art forms and more. Nartaki.com, the first online platform for arts in India founded by Dr. Anita R Ratnam, has been contributing to this field since 2000 which is remarkable. The website has a wealth of information on many art forms and artists. We found her as a perfect mentor to have an interview with her in this edition.

We also got the wonderful opportunity to publish the article about 'Pung Cholom' by Thingom Brojen Kumar Singha, a prominent and famous Cholom artist in India. Apart from these, we included a review of book "Shastra"- A Journey Through Indian Music History, written by Saskia Rao De Haas.

Arts that were once the spirit of Indian heritage are now deteriorating into simple means of subsistence for those who keep them alive. Punarjjani realises the need to revive it and joins the movements of conserving the cultural legacy. Our objective is to establish a foundation for the preservation of these traditional art forms, therefore passing them on to future generations.

INTERVIEW

POST COVID SCENARIO DEMANDS VAST INVESTMENT IN PERFORMING ARTS

-ANITA R RATNAM

"I feel it's the responsibility of every artiste to give something back to society. We should find ways of reaching out and sharing values..."

wrote on Nartaki.com by Dr. Anita R Ratnam, founder of Nartaki.com, Director of Arangham Dance Theatre, SNA awardee, she continues her journey by contributing to the world of dance in its very needed version. Her role as an art entrepreneur, scholar and artist is significant and to understand it more, we would love to go through what she is telling here...

Q Nartaki was a revolutionary initiative during its time and continues to be till this date. However, back in those days the internet and related technologies hadn't fully developed and weren't as prevalent as today. What kind of challenges did you face in that regard?

A The very idea of Nartaki started first as a phone directory in 1992 and a second edition in 1997. I wanted to create a collegueship among dancers in India and across the world. I was living in New York at that time and realised that the Embassy and Consulates in the USA did not have a list of the most prominent dance artistes of India. That was the genesis of Nartaki. In April 2000, we went online since it seemed the logical move to reduce printing costs

and enable easy updates of addresses and contact information. It was a time when mobile phones were coming into prominence. E mail ID's were slowly appearing. Dancers were getting onto the digital age. However, it was a very slow process. Many gurus did not want to share information about their best students. Phone numbers and addresses changed frequently. Dancers were not responsive and did not understand what we wanted to do. However, I persisted, knowing that I was creating something unusual for the global Indian dance community. The first two phone directories sold out in 6 months of being released. But the website, www.narthaki.com took much longer to make an impact.



At first it was the content of phone numbers and addresses that were transferred online. The current avatar of information that the portal carries is the result of a slow but consistent growth the past two decades.

Narthaki is now a global brand. Trusted and respected for the information and opinions it carries. As a performer myself, it was essential that I did not use it for my career and project myself all the time on it. I have a monthly editorial but leave the micro management to my team of Lalitha Venkat, Sumathi and Raksha Patel.

Q One of your recent projects Boxed connected Artists during the world wide lockdowns when people were at their lowest. What do you think has been the greatest learning during this phase for people, especially Artists?

A March 2020 was a global phenomenon. The total lockdown for India was shocking for all of us. We were under house arrest, it seemed and so many dancers were stunned with shows, classes, travel all cancelled. I thought "How can I connect young dancers at this time and help them feel like they are part of a global community?" "How can I let them know that their suffering is not unique to them but that everyone was feeling the same way?"

That was the genesis of BOXED. The feeling of being boxed in. Trapped in our homes. Contemporary and classical dancers in 7 countries. - 45 in all - responded with immediate delight.

Someone had actually thought about them ! The series became a global hit and was applauded, praised and mentioned in many articles and online festivals. I did not realise its impact and I know that while producing BOXED, All we thought about was how to help dancers showcase their talent during this difficult time.

Many dancers told us that the 2 minute video they performed in helped their mental state. Many were in deep depression and found BOXED very therapeutic. The biggest learning for the dancers and for me was that in spite of having nothing, we made something happen. That beyond, costume, stage, lights, orchestra and an audience seated in front of you - Dance Continues.

That it is possible to befriend technology and produce/present/create DANCE in a totally different way for global viewing. It was a huge learning curve for all of us. I learned how to use technology- to harness my own brand image on social media to share my thoughts and impressions. From a very dark place, we found a way to make light and smile. And dance through it all.

Q In spite of having a rich history in the Arts, there is a massive lag in Art Education in India. This also affects the ones who want to pursue a career in Art/Performance Art. How do you think we, as a nation, can address it?

A We have disconnected Philosophy and History from our academic syllabus. Both subjects are important for the live arts. In India, the traditions of sculpture, music, painting, architecture and design are all braided into the dance traditions. How can Dance, Theatre And Music become important and central to the Humanities in education if we do not respect the context and history of the forms? Arts education has not stressed employment and earning capacities. We have told students that you become a artiste for your soul. That money is not important. That is certainly not true. Artistes are also human and need money just like others. We need to bring artistes and their way of thinking back to a central point in our business schools and engineering schools. After all, a dancer combines Physics and Chemistry. Psychology and Sociology. A dancer is a living example of so many disciplines and it is important to revive that honour and respect for those in the live arts. This marginalisation must not continue and we must find a way to integrate Arts Education as compulsory from kindergarten to class 10. Once a child is exposed to the arts up to age 16, he or she will always have Arts in their lives.

Q Can Dance, Theatre and other live art forms in India have a potential for large investments?

A In terms of monetary gain, the Live Arts (dance, music, theatre, puppetry) do not give ready returns. If one thinks of Balance Sheets, Profit and Loss statements and Return on Investments, then one must only turn to Contemporary Art. The painting market has boomed and contemporary art has seen enormous investments. With the Live Arts, we are looking at human beings. Not objects. And people have emotions, lives, ups and downs. Investing in a theatre company, a folk art company, a young and emerging dance company can have so many advantages in India. Look at the investment in Cricket and other sports now! Performing artistes cannot wear logos of sponsors or have mainstream television coverage. However, they can be supported for a period of 5 years by a corporate who can support their monthly income and help them focus on their craft. They can also request the premiere performance for their staff or senior management. When the company tours, it can proudly carry the company logo on their PR material. Because one cannot touch and feel and own the live arts like a painting or an object, Indians do not value them. During the pandemic, countries like UK, Germany, USA, Canada and Australia - to name just a few- gave so much money to all artistes. So that they could live, eat, pay their bills and wait for the time when theatres reopened. Unfortunately, in India, we speak in slogans India Shining, Atmanirbhar and Mera Bharat Mahaan but we do not follow up with action on the ground. Artistes were left to starve, commit suicide and somehow manage by themselves. The money offered to them was so meagre that it could not even cover their food costs.

While star artistes around the world get huge money from corporates just to boost the company's image by association, here in India, dancers, stage actors and musicians do not command star value. Unless they are affiliated to Bollywood. Which is another whole different story.

Q Art has always been a saviour and often an escape for people going through troubled and negative experiences in life. Do you think Art has the potential to turn a difficult phase in someone's life into something meaningful and teach them valuable lessons?

A Art For Healing is not a new Mantra. Those with mental and physical challenges have turned to the arts for help. Pottery, sculpture, ceramics, music, dance, singing, painting, writing - All these are known and established arts disciplines to foster healing, promote wellness, induce creativity and spark innovations. Doctors routinely play classical music during major surgeries to help the brain focus. Learning disabilities which afflict more and more children can be helped with creative movement and drumming. Apart from these areas, elders and those in their 50s 60s often feel depressed and lonely. Many turn to self harm and this is the time for the ARTS to intervene. We as a society must AMPLIFY the potential of the arts to heal. The body and the mind are marvellous instruments. Not everyone can become an artiste. And artiste is a prophet, a healer a storyteller, a friend and a psychologist. It is such a beautiful gift. We need to propagate this instead of just churning out dancers with Arangetrams from our thousands of dance schools. DMT - Dance Movement Therapy is a major discipline in several US universities. It is being used to treat soldiers returning from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria with severe PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It has proven terrific results. In India, we must also recognise the Arts For Therapy as a serious and skilled area to study



Dr Anita R Ratnam

Shastra

A Journey Through Indian Music History by Saskia Rao De Haas, a chronicle of Indian Classical Music.

The Sixth book of the Sangeet4All series written by cellist Saskia Rao-De Haas is out and as the byline goes, it is truly a wonderful journey through Indian Music History. The brain-child of Pt. Shubhendra Rao and Vidushi Saskia Rao-De Haas, Sangeet4All is an Indian music curriculum for young learners. It is a complete education framework for young learners with a proper methodology and pedagogy.

Saskia Rao-De Haas was born in the Netherlands and belongs to a family that encouraged and influenced her interest and love for music. After studying Cello from one of the world-renowned cellists, Tibor De Machula, she went on to pursue her Masters in Ethnomusicology at the University of Amsterdam. She trained under Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia during her time at the Conservatory of Rotterdam and in 1994 she started studying Indian Music at Delhi University under the guidance of Dr. Sumati Mutatkar. It was during this time that she met Pandit Shubhendra Rao among other notable Indian musicians who tutored her.

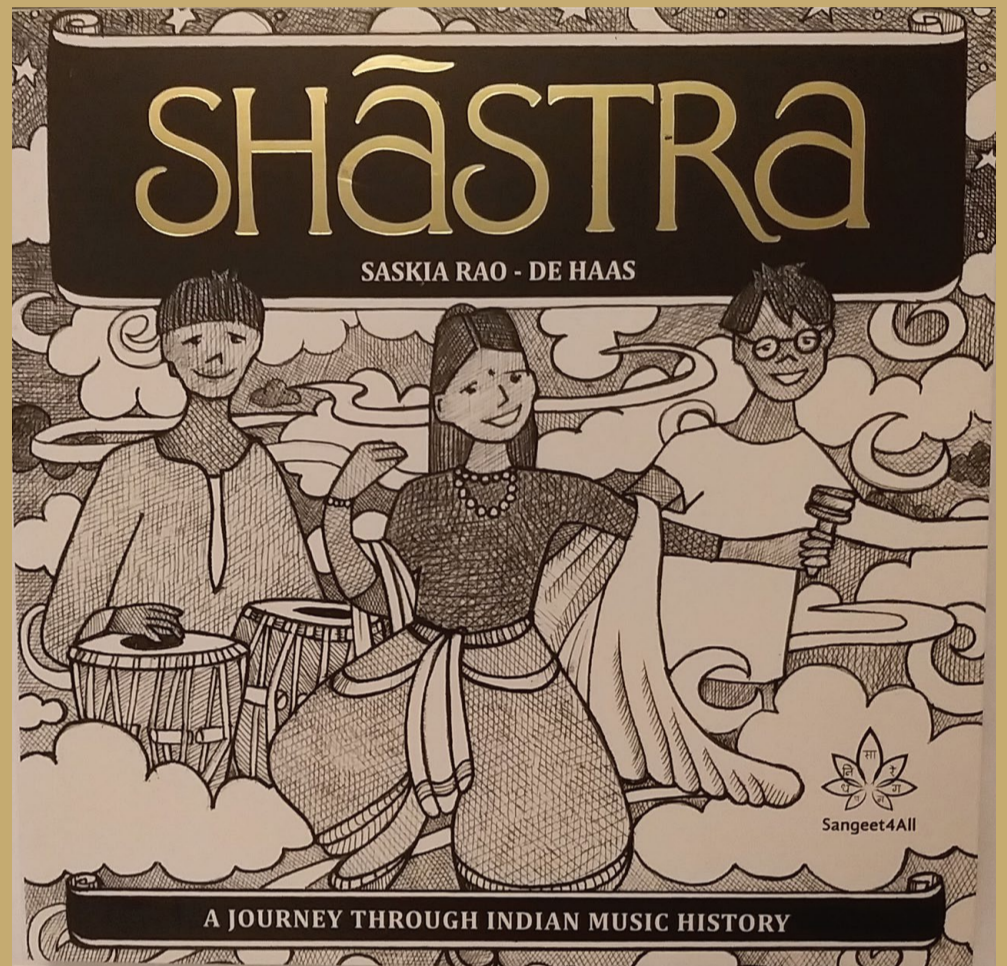


Saskia Rao and Shubhendra Rao, during their time in the Indian music scene, noticed a vital lag in the curricula under the Indian education system. As people associated with the field and having the knowledge of the history and brilliance of Indian Music, they noticed the need to incorporate the rich traditions into the regular curriculum. Their aim was not only to spread awareness about Indian Classical Music but also to create an interactive and innovative way to incorporate Indian Music traditions which would cater to the diverse needs of Indian students. This was how Sangeet4all was born.

By far, the organisation has published eleven books on music, which have been designed and devised in a way to reach children, appeal to them and build their curiosity about Indian Music. In major Indian School Boards, music curriculums are limited and provide very less exposure to the vastness of what Indian Classical Music has to offer. The Sangeet4All books aim at providing a child with necessary information and instil in them the excitement to learn about the age old traditions, especially at a time when children are over-exposed to Western modern music through the widespread use of the Internet.

The narrative of Shastra is simple yet engaging. Rao has introduced four primary characters - Surya, Azim, Urvashi and Megha who actively interact with the reader throughout the text. It is through them that the story of Indian Music is slowly revealed. At the end of each chapter, another character, Chitrasena (the head of the Gandharvas who are the musicians from the Heavens and Urvashi's father) presents the reader with an assignment. Consisting of questions and activities, these assignments facilitate looking back at the chapter as well as honing skills in research and building curiosity. This helps one in exploring the vastness of Indian Musical history beyond the book and on their own.

The book is divided into nine chapters which cover the whole of Indian Music. Starting from the Prehistoric times roughly till 5000 BCE, it ends with Modern Indian Music. Saskia Rao has done a great job in compiling the history of 2500 years into 92 pages. One of the main elements that have made this possible is the assignment attached at the end of each chapter. As the author mentions in the Preface, "This book is a history of Indian music and not the history of Indian music, since a subject as extensive as Indian music history can never be the perspective of one chronicler". The assignments cater exactly to this aim. Through them, the reader can expand the horizon of their knowledge and also learn to use technology and the internet to discover and learn the expansive nature of the history of an artform belonging to such an incredibly diverse country. Apart from these, the narrative of the book is so simple that it affluently recounts the saga of the development of Indian music through the various eras. The narrative also weaves in the socio-political and cultural transformations that are vital to the changes in time that influenced the progress of Indian music.



Shastra delivers exactly what it aims to do and the illustrations play a great role in making that a possibility. Colin Campbell has done a wonderful job in bringing the book to life and making it all the more interesting and relatable. Be it the illustrations of the musical instruments, or the paintings of the famous musicians in history, they beautifully capture the essence of the setting and have the ability of successfully teleporting the reader back in time. They aid imagination in a child along with connecting them to centuries long gone. Md Moeen Aijaz has designed the book and put together all the good things perfectly to create an ideal blend. The intermingling of uncomplicated language, a wonderful and interesting narrative and the delightful set of characters brought into life by Colin Campbell, is the flawless combination for a book meant to instil the love and joy in learning about Indian Classical music.

Unlike the other books published before by Sangeet4All, Shastra is meant for students of and beyond Grade 5. Needless to say, it is the perfect start for anyone and everyone who wants to start learning and knowing more about Indian Classical Music. As an adult, reading this book will take you back to the older times, to your childhood when grandmothers would narrate stories of legends or programmes like the Panchatantra that would play on the television set on Sunday afternoons. The oral history like narrative and the interactive child characters along with Urvashi and Chitrasena has produced a piece of work that should be included in the syllabus of children in Indian schools. It does justice to the age-old and the oldest continuous music tradition of the world and gloriously presents it to us on a golden platter.

Shastra has been published by Sangeet4All and is available to purchase on their website. The Paperback copy of the book is priced at INR 800/- and a Hardcover can be bought for INR 1200/-. To order a copy, head on to their website, www.sangeet4all.com.

CHOLOM – A legacy of 2000 years..



Thingom Brojen Kumar Singha is one of the most prominent and famous Pung artists in India. He is the first pung artist from Assam who performed with many eminent figures and was trained under famous personalities. His artistic skills were nurtured by his family who was highly culturally inclined.



Photo: Priyanka B

India is home to numerous percussion instruments, classical, folk and tribal. Pung, the traditional drum from Manipur, the corner most state in North East India is perhaps one of the oldest instruments that have stood the test of time to become an irreplaceable part of the Manipuri culture. This association is so strong that it is also known as the Manipuri Mridang. It is held in so high esteem that there is even a whole dance form based upon the Pung called the Pung Cholom, which means drum with the dance.

Pung Cholom also has a mythological aspect to it. It is said that if a Brahmin worships Vishnu through this art using instruments and with the help of others, he will attain heaven. However, if he himself plays and worships, he will become a follower of Vishnu. Manipuri gurus being the follower of Goudiya Vaisnavism consider Pung (mridang), the timekeeper, the most auspicious instrument forming an essential part of religion. It is also described as Krishnaswarupa, an embodiment of Krishna, where the two sides are considered the eyes of Krishna, the two rings (Khudop) represent the bangles of Krishna, the black colour (khe) on the wood depicts the dark complexion of Krishna, while the red strap (Thangnmari) is Navagunjama.

Pung is so much part of the Manipuri culture that no one really knows how long this drum has been in existence. It is said that Pung was introduced into the area by king Khuwai Timpok in the year 154AD. However, many believe it could have existed even before that.

During its early years, Pung had only one beating face. With time it has developed into the current form of Meitei Pung which has two beating faces. Over the years, this became an integral part of Natasankritan which is an important part of Manipuri culture.

Being the grandson of late guru Lalababu who is also a renowned drummer in Barak Valley which is a major part of Northeast India, I was introduced to the art of pung playing at a very tender age itself. Then I went on to train under the renowned pung stalwart Guru Merino Singh. With constant effort and practice, I got the privilege to be the first pung artist from Assam who received the Taal mani award and travelled to more than 20 countries, around the world, solo and in groups.

I also got the opportunity to train and perform with many other Manipuri Pung and dance artists like Smt. Kalavati Devi, the renowned Manipuri dance guru and recipient of the Manipur State Kala Academy Award and Padmashree Darshana Jhaweri, among others.

What makes Pung Cholom so unique is that it attempts the perfect synchronisation of intricate footwork, graceful and forceful body movements, along with playing on the drum. It has a variety of energetic body move-

ments along with those that are poised, balanced, and restrained.

Considered an essential part of Sankirtan, Pung Cholom is performed in almost all the festivities of Manipuri tradition and hence, the artists spend almost all their lives performing and entertaining audiences with the charisma of this artform. In return, they are offered gifts and money which contributes to the sustenance of the art. These artists, however, undergo strict and disciplined training right from childhood. They follow the traditional Gurukul system where they are first taught to master the drum and then the dance movements while staying at their Guru's house.



However, even Pung Cholom (dance with drum) has not been spared the changes that occur with time. In the last 100 years, there has been evident variation in the performances. Gurus can now add different Tala compositions or dance compositions in between the traditional sequence of 7 Tala compositions that are supposed to be followed in each of the performances. Apart from that, the focus has also shifted from stylised movements to gimmicks and acrobatic movements with an intent to bring in more appreciation from the audience.

With change comes adaptation, and hence, Pung Cholom has also chosen different ways to adjust to the slow transition of time. Stage performances are now being held and the popularity has even crossed Manipuri borders today. Short compositions with more than 2 artists are being choreographed and even prioritized for the same, thereby making the art form more attractive, unique, and entertaining.

There are numerous risks present in Pung Cholom in addition to the fantastic experience. Once, when I travelled to Kerala for a performance, the outdoor production Leisem featured numerous fire sequences. The organisers were concerned, but we reassured them that we had all the necessary safety precautions in place. We had just wet gunny bags left over after the fire sequences, but we managed to put out the fire, for which we are grateful.

However, I personally believe that the rituals must be kept intact at least during social occasions to preserve the traditional aspect of Pung Cholom.