

# TANDAVAM

INAUGURAL ISSUE: FEBRUARY 2021

Dance During The  
Pandemic

Meet Aishwarya  
Srinivasan: NCSU  
Thandav

Why We Dance

DR. JANAKI RANGARAJAN

"DANCE IS AKIN TO  
BREATHING"







**THE TANDAVAM.COM**

**VOLUME 1  
A MAGAZINE  
FEBRUARY 2021**

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PRANAMYA SHIRASA DEVOU  
PITHAMAHA MAHESWAROU  
NATYASHASTRAM PRAVAKSYAMI  
BRAHAMANAYA  
DUTHAHRUTHAM

”

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Hi everyone! My name is Kusum, I'm a junior at Chantilly High School, and I've been dancing for as long as I can remember. As my dance education has progressed over the years, I've realized that the awareness for Indian dance through the media was very hard to find and I didn't really understand why the representation of South Asian Dance was not as mainstream, as other Western Classical Arts. Writing has always been something I enjoy, whether in school or just for fun! This year at school, I am taking Journalism and I am an editor for my school newspaper.

So naturally, I wanted to try and find a way to make discussions about South Asian Dance mainstream! (and bridging the two things I love doing- dance and writing- what an absolute bonus!)

Here's what to expect: Tandavam (Monthly Magazine) hopes to be a source for all things related to South Asian dance, both classical and classical-derived, with a primary focus in the United States. It'll be a collection of: in-depth articles, life stories, insightful interviews, and other exciting events based in the community! However, we do have a subscription as we work hard to bring you quality content from established artists, and because unfortunately nothing is free. This issue is free, but free sign up is open till Feb 28th. Please check website for details.

I want to thank you all for supporting Tandavam so far and coming along on this adventurous journey. Hope you enjoy!



# Dance During The Pandemic

COVID-19 has changed lives all around the world. Not only has it changed the way we work, socialize, and travel, but it has also impacted the way we stay active. Dancing during the pandemic has been a challenge, but as time progresses, we have learned to adapt and grow.

As the daughter of a dance teacher, I have firsthand seen the challenges that come with online learning. The glance down at a phone, eyes darting between tabs, the suppressed smile at a message from a friend, and the lack of supervision all come naturally with zoom sessions. I've realized that the element that ignites all these distractions comes down to the student's degree of motivation..

Students who are driven, choose to overcome distractions and focus their energy into being present class members, while others may not have the same drive

**"THE ADRENALINE I FEEL RUSHING THROUGH MY BODY AS I PERFORM ON THE STAGE IS UNBEATABLE."**



Not being able to participate in performances and competitions is not an ideal situation for me, but the dance teachers in our community have made us look at the best of the situation. I've had the opportunity to do online performances by taking videos prior to the streamed date and I've enjoyed it, although it is nothing compared to the thrill of a live performance

Preparing for live performances involved getting back in the groove of dressing up, applying makeup, and the slight stress before performing, while the usual laziness on a normal quarantine morning is a completely different experience. Even though these experiences have definitely made quarantine just a bit better,

In my experience, during in-person learning, you can feel the energy coming from the dance teacher and it is much easier to translate their detailed movements into the dance. However, during online learning, it is much more difficult to understand the intricate nuances of abhinaya, or facial expressions.

Online learning also means that internet connection issues are common hindrances. Simultaneously learning dance while other members of my family worked online definitely affected my learning through the pandemic. The constant low connection signs, blurriness of the screen, and getting kicked out of classes has been a struggle that I'm sure many people are facing.

Being in the shoes of a dance teacher, I understood how difficult it was to keep students motivated and engaged during class. I tutored many young students who I had once taught in in-person classes and the difference in their attention-span was difficult to overcome.

**From March 2020**, the traditional dance class experience has definitely evolved. Performing live with hundreds watching almost feels like a fantasy.

**However, having the ability to dance at all, definitely provides a sense of normalcy.**



**ANJALI ASHOK IS A FRESHMAN AT CHANTILLY HIGH, VIRGINIA & IS A BHARATANATYAM STUDENT**

## Why I Dance: Bhavana

One reason I dance is because I always have a song stuck in my head. Whether it's a slow and steady rhythm that I'm internally improvising on, or a beautiful melody I can't forget, I've always got a song in mind that moves me. It doesn't suffice for me to just think about the song, I have to express the song through movement. Small movements become larger ones and before I know it, I'm feeling the sway of music in all the extremities of my body.

I dance to feel every beat of the music in my bones. It makes me feel like I'm flying, harnessing all the energy from the space around me to become one with a sound. Even in stillness, there's so much beauty in just letting my emotions dance to a song.



### "I dance to feel that connection with other people"

For me, the most organic source of relief is allowing my feelings to spill out while relishing in the music that speaks to me.

*By nature, I'm an introverted person, with time dance has become a bridge to the outside - it's become a way for me to reach beyond myself without using words. With the right piece of music, all my frustration, excitement, fear and joy come out and I let my body and face narrate how I feel. Dance has quite literally made me friends as well! It's a wonderful networking tool that allows artists to communicate and find things in common with each other. The most gratifying feeling is when my energy is on the same wavelength as another dancer's and we're able to explore a song together. For some time, we're both sharing an internal rhythm that we can be creative with.*

Dance moves me internally just as much as it does externally. I dance to let my energy manifest and speak on my behalf and I dance to connect with the energy of other people, whether I am portraying them or working with them. What I love most is that the dance journey is never-ending - there's always so much more to explore.



BHAVANA CHANNAVAJJALA BEGAN LEARNING KUCHIPUDI AT AGE 4, AT KALAMANDAPAM UNDER THE TUTELAGE OF GURU SMT. MRINALINI SADANANDA. THROUGH HER DANCE SCHOOL, SHE HAS PERFORMED AT THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS, WASHINGTON DC AMONG OTHERS. SHE IS AN INDIAN RAGA FELLOW AND NOW WORKS IN AN IT COMPANY IN WASHINGTON DC.





## Why I Dance: Manaswini

I was 8 years old. I hated going to dance class. It was monotonous and boring and I was the oldest kid in the class, towering over all the other babies. I would throw all the tantrums in the world to try and stop going. But my mom wouldn't let me quit. Dance is a discipline. Not only is it a movement of the body, but also of the mind and soul. As a kid, of course I wasn't going to understand that.

*What drew me to Kuchipudi was the theatrics.*

Growing up, my daily routine was putting on random shows for my friends and family and jumping around to sounds and make people laugh with my corny dialogue. As I moved forward with dance classes in Kuchipudi, I realized that all my favorite worlds of drama, rhythm, and music were coming together in perfect harmony.

**"I don't remember when it clicked, but I, the notorious night owl, found myself sleeping early to wake up everyday at 5am to practice."**

Dance is communication. Over the course of learning, we are trained to understand how the body moves and as well as how to react in certain events. How do you tell someone that you are sad? What is it like to bottle up that feeling of anger but still maintain your composure in the midst of a large crowd? I found myself letting out all my emotions that, as an adolescent, was having a hard time processing in my day to day life.

Dance classes and performances felt like the ultimate release of feelings that I wasn't able to put into words. *My YoungArts experience in 2012 is what really changed me as an artist.* I had just finished my arangetram and I didn't know what to do next. But through YoungArts, I had the opportunity to get out of my cultural bubble and visualize and understand different art forms that I was not normally exposed to. At the same time, being able to represent my art form and culture was an incredibly proud and humbling moment. The experience gave me the confidence to proudly consider myself as an artist and to pursue it professionally. To this day, I consider YoungArts week to be the turning point in my dance career.

Pursuing classical dance outside of India isn't easy. But the challenge of doing something that isn't typically done is what drives me to want it more. In addition, the more I learn about Kuchipudi and get more into the theoretical aspects and socio-political context of which Kuchipudi originated, I feel more connected to my ancestral roots and build on my cultural knowledge. Though I do feel like I have made great strides in my classical dance education, the road has just begun and there is still a long way to go.



MANASWINI AVVARI HAS BEEN LEARNING KUCHIPUDI FROM GURU JYOTHI LAKKARAJU SINCE 2003. MANASWINI WAS A FINALIST IN DANCE FOR YOUNGARTS AND AN INDIANRAGA FELLOW AND PARTICIPATED IN THE INDIANRAGA FELLOWSHIPS TO CREATE PRODUCTIONS THAT HAVE GONE VIRAL GLOBALLY. CURRENTLY, MANASWINI DIRECTS AND PRODUCES VARIOUS DANCE AND MUSIC PRODUCTIONS. MANASWINI HAS PERFORMED THROUGHOUT THE NATION AND ABROAD AND HAS LEARNED THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF INDIAN CULTURE, EMBRACING ITS INTRICACIES AND NUANCES THROUGH DANCE.



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# feature

*"I absolutely cannot survive a day without dance."*



PC: Mr. Santhosh

# FEATURE: DR. JANAKI RANGARAJAN

At the forefront of the new generation of Bharatanatyam dancers, "Nadanamamani" Dr. Janaki Rangarajan represents the future of the ancient art form. Since the age of 4, Janaki has been passionate about communicating through dance. Her unique dance style is a sincere result of her undying passion, self-motivation and dedication towards Bharatanatyam. Her refreshing approach to Bharatanatyam has won her many accolades and praise from dance lovers around the world. Being a firm believer in maintaining the integrity of tradition, Janaki explores her creativity without compromising on the classicism of the dance form. (credit: Janakairangarajan.com)



**Let's start at the beginning, which is the pandemic. How have you coped? From when it hit us in March 2020 to now, almost 11 months later, tell us your journey as a dancer, on adapting, on persevering, on perhaps managing the withdrawals of stage performances?**

**Dancers, rather artists, know how to cope- comes naturally to us.** As we learn the art form, which strengthens us inside out, we also acquire the knowledge that helps us adapt to different situations- whether a bad stage or a serious injury or a pandemic. This pandemic is only a tad different in that it forced all of us to adapt at the same time. It has definitely taken a toll on the lives of many artists and destroyed many livelihoods. I consider myself to be one of the privileged ones and I am truly grateful for this. At the same time, as a performing artist who travels quite a lot, this has been a complete shutdown. Regardless, it has given me more time to reflect, to learn/unlearn and to delve deeper into my art form. My everyday life has been the same sans the travels and the stage performances, filled with regular practice, choreographic sessions, reading, teaching and having meaningful conversations/associations with kindred souls. I realize that this phase is for all of us to **slow down, ponder and rejuvenate** for the greater good. I hope we all come out stronger and wiser!



**How do you think the pandemic has evolved the dance community? What do you see today and in the dancers and artists that has made them slightly different, changed or evolved from early on?**

I believe it has brought us closer; I think it made **us realize how dependent and vulnerable we are**. It is wonderful to see students take the art form seriously regardless of an imminent performance or not. I have had scores of passionate students message me asking about daily practice, body conditioning, rhythm, theory etc. This is a **much needed and a welcome change** in a field where most dancers don't tend to think beyond what is being taught.

Perhaps a drawback: **Deluge of online performances**, many of them lacking any kind of quality control. As much as I am happy that the exposure via social media has made the stage more even and given well deserved visibility to talented dancers who had previously lacked proper opportunities, unfortunately, it has also created a **problematic situation where everything was/is given for free**. This is a big issue in a field that is already notoriously famous for not paying artists. I hope dancers reflect a bit more so that it goes beyond personal gain.



**So do you think the changes we see are here to stay? How do you foresee a post-pandemic dance community, events? Like the dance festivals, the Arangetrams, the Sabhas and the way an organizer would work? Do you think there has been a shift in how we are now slowly beginning to approach and reverse the artform?**

**Nothing can come close to watching a performance LIVE** (not FB/Insta/Youtube LIVE). There is a palpable energy that we experience when we are all together in that space and no amount of technology can achieve or recreate that. When we come together, it more than just the performance. The social interaction pre- and post-performance is as important. So, while the concept of online performance may stay, it will not and cannot replace live performances. Also, after almost a year of online performances, I believe, there is a **certain level of fatigue that is set in towards these shows**. With the onset of vaccine administration, I think, people would love to commune to watch a live show. It is already happening in India as I write and US is not too far away from that moment.



From a dancer's and perhaps, a personal perspective- We need a live audience; **We feed off from the energy that they transmit and it is no fun to dance in front of a camera.** However, technology is not necessarily a bad thing- I have personally learned so much. If we can make these **online performances financially viable and sustainable for the artists**, that would be great but I am not seeing that now for the most part. So, instead of ignoring technology, let us learn to use it wisely for the benefit of ALL. Not just the audience but also the artists, organizers and any others involved.

Both the stage/live and online performances can flourish as parallel streams focusing on good quality ART.



**Okay, let's talk about dance. How and what does dance mean to you? I see that you started very young, and at a time that maybe you did not study it as a mindful conscious learning, but at some point, am sure the consciousness shifted. What is your view of being a classical dancer, and the purpose of dance? Has your view shifted along your journey, on what it is to be a dancer?**

Dance is the breath I take. There is no existence without it. I started at 4 upon my grandmother's informed decision. **It took me a few good years to realize what a blessing it was.** I was always learning, dancing, performing and watching a lot but I never thought of it as something that I would completely surrender to. Also, this was the time when taking up dance full time was not considered to be a good career decision regardless of gender. It was not until my early 20s that I realized what it really meant to me and what kind of impact it had on my life. By then, I had finished my doctorate and it was in the middle of my post-doc that **I quit to take up dance full time.**

I was derided by many, including my close-minded relatives, but I knew what I was getting into including the challenges and risks; Either it was now or never! I took few years to prepare myself from scratch and it was **very tough with no godmother/mentor/advisor or any influence in the field** and this is way before social media/internet. I truly believed that hard work would pay (my grandmother's words for me always) but at the same time, **I was fully prepared to fail as a 'professional dancer'.** Today, when I look back, I have many to **thank and grateful for those souls** who inspired and continue to inspire me to be a better artist/human. I believe the purpose my Art is to **share my voice** with others and hopefully inspire others to find theirs.



**Dance and choreography: Is there a conscious divide? I believe that as an artist, learning to express is nuanced, and choreography/composition is an extension of our learning. How does one refine a composition?**

For me, NO. It is an **extension of my thoughts and experiences**. I never took any professional course in choreography. Thankfully, it came naturally to me. Of course, it is easier to dance to one's own choreography. It becomes a bit more complicated when you have to understand someone's else's vision and bring it to life. For this to happen organically, one has to think quite a bit about the choreography, read, talk to the choreographer about their thought process and understand the role of a performer. Then, practice, practice, practice until it is etched in the soul and flows organically.



**We love watching the little lessons you teach via Instagram, and scores of young dancers are learning, and absorbing it. Do you enjoy being a teacher? Is it something that comes naturally to you? How do you find that role, the challenges of teaching the artform as opposed to performing the art.**

I love being a teacher. I enjoy the process of sharing. In my opinion, it is one the most difficult and yet, highly under-appreciated jobs globally! I started as a student tutor when I was hardly in my teens under the careful guidance of senior teachers in my dance class. Dance class was everything for me when I was not at regular school. I would **watch my Guru, senior dancers/teachers for hours together and what I absorbed subconsciously was something spectacular.**

I strongly believe that this kind of learning can only happen when you shadow your teacher day in and day out and I was lucky to get that very very early in my life. Because of this strong experience at a young age, teaching came naturally to me. **When you teach, you learn.** You need to be responsible and set a standard for yourself and your students, whether you signed up for it or not. Also, you are responsible for **passing on the art form** and preserving it for years to come. But when things fall in place and my students shine and soar- There is no greater joy!



**Spirituality: Dance is spiritual. What is your take on it, and how did you find the connect?**

Dance has helped me understand myself in ways that cannot be expressed in words. It has embraced me in my highs and lows, given me a deep sense of my micro existence in this macro cosmos and opened my thoughts to different perspectives about life itself. **Without dance, I don't exist!**



**Talk to us about classical dance in the USA. I recall you living in Northern VA many years ago, and teaching here. The scene has burst over the past few years, and all over the US with more parents and second generation kids embracing the classical dances. What are your thoughts on this and the challenges the teachers and parents face in transcribing and holding the art as close to the original as possible?**

There has always been a lot of interest in Bharatanatyam, not just in North America, but all over. With the advent of social media, this has gained even more attention. It is really good for the art form but are they doing it because they love the art form or is it just peer pressure? Regardless, only those who truly love it enough will stick with it for years to come.

Bharatanatyam has always gracefully evolved with the social trends of that time. We have come a long way from how Bala amma danced Bharatanatyam to how we dance it today. It will keep evolving but teachers should be **careful to not compromise on the basic grammar of the art form** regardless of the geographic location. That is just NOT done. The vocabulary of Bharatanatyam has given us enough freedom to explore but **careful analysis along with an in-depth knowledge is imperative before boundaries are pushed.** Teachers should teach what the students need to learn and not what they want to learn. **Discipline cannot be compromised** for personal likes/dislikes/convenience. **Parents need to trust the teachers and let them do the job!**





**What is it about the dance students in the USA that is especially endearing and impressive?**

Indian origin kids in North America are raised with different cultures- **One at home and a different one outside. They learn to juggle both** and this gives them the ability to **adapt easily** and understand different perspectives. Even though they might get initially baffled by the kind of discipline/life style that is required to learn this art form, when explained in a way that they understand, they take it to heart and work hard to rise up to what is expected. **Critical thinking** is yet another aspect that I find very impressive- Much needed to find and sustain your passion!



**Arangetrams: The long and short of it. How close or how relevant are they still from their original idea? According to you, when is a student ready?**

Very far and more for social status for most part- Unfortunately!

In my opinion, it should not be done for any student **who does not intend to continue** and delve further into BN. I fail to see the purpose when done otherwise. Yes, **it encourages the student but what is the point if that is deemed the end!** The student is ready when they understand the purpose of this art form, is passionate about learning more, and well versed both in practice and theory.



**How do you find the energy and drive to stick with it, daily, every day and for years together? Passion is one thing, but to wake up every day with renewed vigor to put in the sweat and tears takes a lot more out of a person than just loving the artform. Can you elaborate on how you go about it?**

For me, dancing is akin to breathing. I absolutely cannot survive a day without dance. I know I will go insane and lose it completely. A day without dance is painful and torturous for me and my loved ones. This is my life; This is what I chose to do and this is the purpose of my existence. I need no other reason to do it every day. Why would I not do what I enjoy the most?



**On Instagram, you not only show us vignettes of your dance, and prep, but also you are vocal about things that matter. You are bold and strong and we love it! Tell us why you speak your mind and not allow things to slide by, coz that is a “safe” way to be. How do you think this has changed people’s perspective of you?**

What is the purpose of fame and a voice if it cannot be used for greater good! **I don’t want to take ‘safe’ to my grave.** I don’t ponder or worry what others think of me as long as I am true to my Art and myself and speak the truth as I see it. If it resonates with others, I will be happy that it did.

I would like to live and die for a reason that is greater than me.



**Your advice to all the young ones, with respect to dance, self-care, and perhaps strength (physical and emotional)**

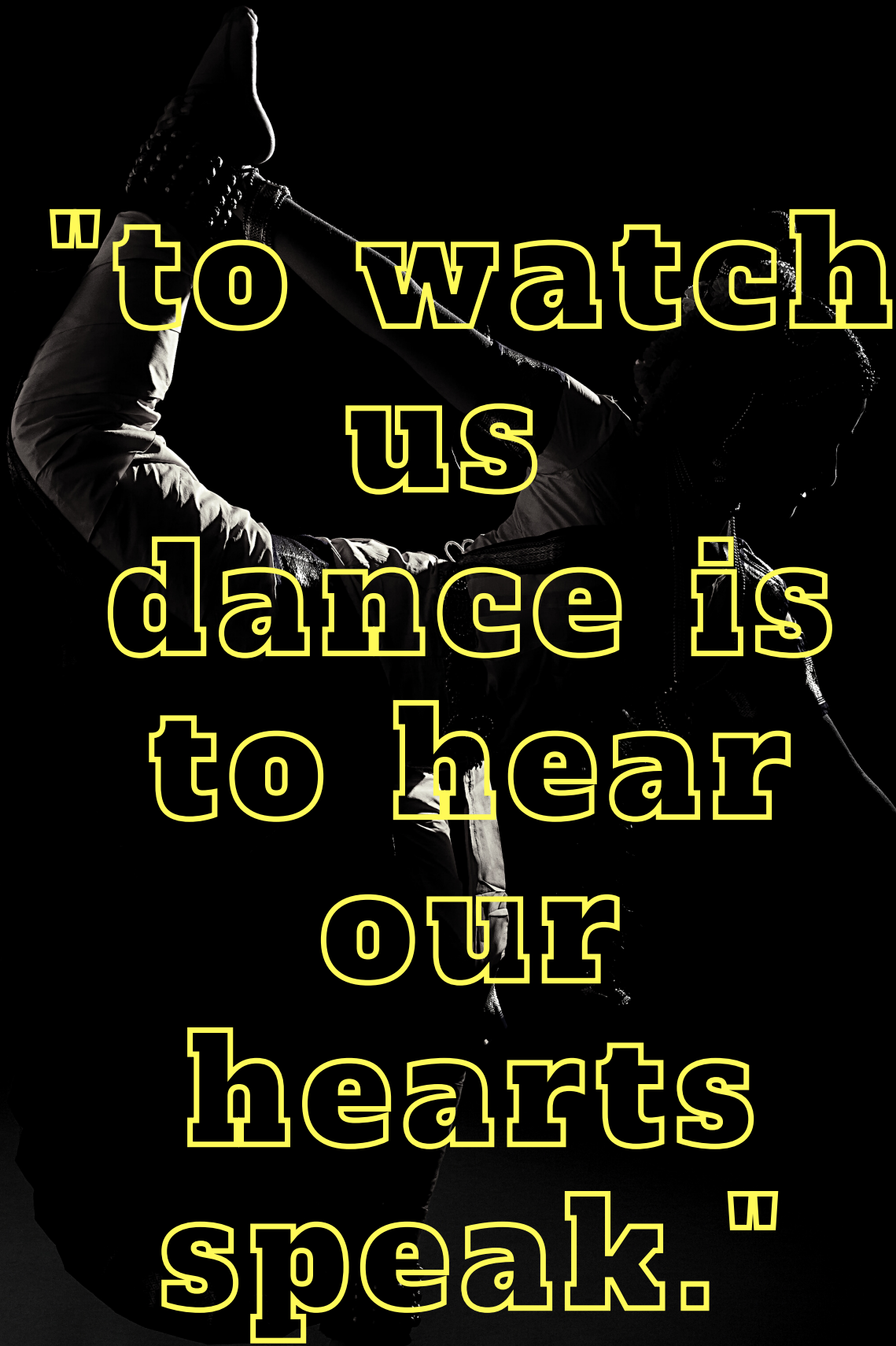
If you chose to dance, **learn to surrender** to it every breathing second. Let no one tell you otherwise. Love and embrace it every day. Dream big and work hard. Do not be apprehensive of failures. **You are not alone.**

Every failure is a learning lesson to rise higher. **Be a force to reckon with** and spread love!  
**DANCE AWAY!!!**



#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

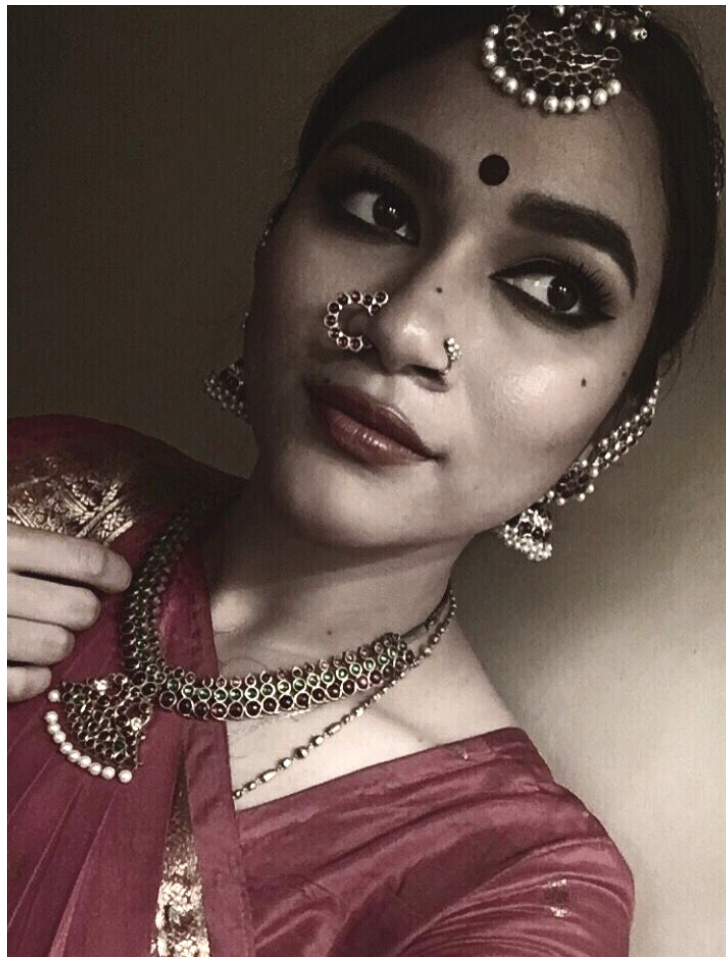
Dr. Janaki Rangarajan's words are unedited. We thank her immensely for her quick turnaround, understanding and for her absolutely candid answers to our questions. She may be followed on Instagram here (@drjanakirangarajan) and also on her website JanakiRangarajan.com. She lives in Virginia, USA, and teaches and travels extensively as it permits.



**"to watch  
us  
dance is  
to hear  
our  
hearts  
speak."**

Hopi Saying





## Why I Dance: Kuhokee

A journal entry from a humid July evening reads, “... there are many things I wish to do to honor Baba, especially dance, and lots of it. Dance has become a means to temporarily save myself from the bottomless ocean of grief. I find that, for a few moments, I am fully immersed in movement, and nothing else matters.” In a happier time, I would’ve been inclined to presumptuously proclaim that my art connects me to my Soul and, in association, to God.

Truthfully, I’m not sure if it did—how did I know dance had rooted me to my Soul when I did not understand the nature of that very entity? How could I say dance brought me closer to Krishna when His Image was all that I had? I would realize the true implications of the Divine through dance much later.

**When I lost my father, I lost everything—my sense of safety, my innocence, and my blissful ignorance. Everything I knew, all of it, was gone in a flash. I sank with no hope, no wish to swim up to the surface, to breathe. I performed the motions of life with no desire for any of it. Life was unbearable and tasteless. My vanity perished and my body withered away as I lost twenty pounds in a matter of three weeks.**

Reflexively, I would close my eyes and move my hands, back and forth, from *katakamukha* hasta to *alapadma* hasta. I did this slowly, focusing on the stretch of my fingers, the relief of the subtle muscles within them. I opened my eyes to watch the cracked skin of my hands stretch and relax. I did this every day while walking in circles. When my body longed for more movement, I practiced part of a dance. I found that, as I moved, my father’s smiling face dug itself somewhere deep within me.

At first, it was overwhelming and I promptly stopped dancing, choosing to sit on the floor, weeping. Somehow, though, I knew I couldn’t stop. As I continued to dance through the weeks and months, I felt him lodged in my heart, forever smiling. I moved with purpose and love.

I moved to survive and to keep him alive within me. I moved while feeling the suffering of those around me. I moved with the heaviness of the world, churning through the poison, until I tasted drops of nectar. Nothing else mattered.

I realized, with sadness and inexplicable knowing, that the workings of the Soul, of God, are subtle, not what I imagined them to be. I had to be grounded in reality. I had to be plunged into my deepest sorrow to find that part of me which always was, and always will be. *My dance gently heals me, supplying the small doses of ecstasy I direly need to keep going, to realize my fullest potential, and to merge with the Divine.*



KUHOKEE KUMARI DAS, DISCIPLE OF SMT. GURU GARGI CHATTOPADHYAY, HAS TRAINED IN BHARATANATYAM AND KUCHIPUDI SINCE THE AGE OF SIX. AFTER COMPLETING HER BHARATANATYAM ARANGETRAM AND KUCHIPUDI RANGAPRAVESHAM IN 2011, KUHOKEE HAS COLLABORATED AND WORKED WITH MANY TALENTED ARTISTS ACROSS THE GLOBE, SUCH AS KALYAN SEN BARAT AND PADMA BHUSHAN MANNA DEY. SHE HAS PERFORMED IN PRESTIGIOUS PLATFORMS SUCH AS THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, LINCOLN CENTER, AMONGST OTHER RENOWNED VENUES. KUHOKEE IS COMPLETING HER MASTER'S DEGREE IN BIOLOGY AT QUEENS COLLEGE, WHERE SHE ALSO TEACHES AS AN ADJUNCT LECTURER FOR ANATOMY & PHYSIOLOGY.



**DID YOU KNOW?**

**76**

**NUMBER OF INSTA LIVE -  
YOUTUBE PERFORMANCES  
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THE YEAR 2020**

## Why I Dance: Pranav

I am uncertain about most things in my life. I spend hours browsing through Netflix, trying to find the perfect movie for my mood as my food gets cold, only to end up watching five minutes of the movie and falling asleep. I never decide which restaurant to eat at, as my indecision plagues my mind from being satisfied with my choice. In this sea of uncertainty that I swim in, there is one certainty that keeps me afloat: my appreciation, admiration, and affection for Kuchipudi, and dance in general. So, the big question that is always asked: why do I dance? What is it about the Kuchipudi art form, about movement in general, that speaks to me and so many other people? I often hear others always talk about why they dance: it allows us to escape reality and express ourselves, it enables us to stay healthy and fit, it's a way to reduce stress. And while such points are incredibly true and valid, for me, there is a deeper reason that inspires me to dance, a stronger driving force.

**"Just like always, I was different. I was the only Kuchipudi dancer. ..being different unlocked a part me I never realized I had."**

Let me tell you a little more about my personal experience as a male dancer. I started off being very uncomfortable with my identity as a dancer. Makeup? A foreign dress? Being surrounded by all female students? I'm going to get so made fun of. As a pre-teen and early teenager, this is all I cared about. I was uncomfortable because I didn't like trying something new. I was a conformist, hoping to "Stick with the Status Quo," just like in *High School Musical*. In fact, it wasn't until my junior year of high school when I truly "Broke Free," just like *Troy* and *Gabriella*. As a National Young Arts Finalist, spending a week with other dancers in Miami is what allowed me to finally realize why I do what I do.

During this experience, nothing really changed from before. Just like always, I was different. I was the only Kuchipudi dancer. Most other dancers came from a rich background of ballet and contemporary dance. When taking ballet and hip hop master classes from Julliard-trained, internationally recognized dancers I looked, well, like a complete loser.





So why did my mindset change? Because I realized that **being different is beautiful**. I shared my culture, my pride as an Indian-American in a Western-dominated artistic field. Everyone appreciated my contributions as an Indian Classical Dancer, and more than anything they wanted to learn. I wanted to learn. And that is what dance is all about. Even in Kuchipudi, despite learning the same choreographies, learning the same steps, following the same curriculum, **each of us dancers brings something new** and different. *We bring a unique style, we bring a different cultural perspective, familial perspective, from how we were raised.* And **being different unlocked a part of me I never realized I had**. I learned more about my body, about my strengths, weaknesses, how I push myself just when I'm about to collapse as lactic acid builds up in my muscles.

I guess it would take me pages and pages to elaborate on this sort of epiphany. But to all the male, female, gender fluid artists out there: **be you**. There are always people that will cheer you on, including me. That is what dance is all about. Being you. Having friends, family, supporters. Spreading your culture. Sharing your identity.

**Art unites us. That is why we all dance. That is why I dance.**



PRANAV TADIKONDA HAS BEEN LEARNING KUCHIPUDI SINCE HE WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD. HE IS A STUDENT IN THE VEMPATI RAVI SHANKAR SCHOOL OF KUCHIPUDI UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF KALA RATNA GURU SRI VEMPATI RAVI SHANKAR AND SMT. PRIYANKA VEMPATI. HE PREVIOUSLY LEARNED FROM SMT. LAKSHMI BABU IN KUCHIPUDI DANCE ACADEMY. PRANAV HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN THE LOCAL AND NATIONAL ARTS COMMUNITY, AS HE WAS NAMED A 2019 NATIONAL YOUNGARTS FINALIST IN DANCE AND A 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLAR IN THE ARTS. PRANAV IS CURRENTLY A FIRST-YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA AND DANCES FOR PENN DHAMAKA, THE ALL-MALE INDIAN FUSION DANCE TEAM.



# EXPLORING THE DANCE CIRCUIT

EACH DANCER HAS A CHOICE IN INTERPRETING AND PERFORMING THE DANCE THAT THEY HAVE LEARNT OVER THE YEARS. THIS WILL BE A VIEW INTO THE FORMIDABLE DANCE CIRCUIT AT THE COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY LEVEL



OUR COLLEGE FEATURE WOULD BE **NORTH CAROLINA'S CLASSICAL DANCE TEAM: THANDAV.** WE ARE SPEAKING WITH **AISHWARYA SRIRAMAN**, A TEAM MEMBER OF NCSU AND LEARNING ABOUT THE DANCE CIRCUIT. SHE TELLS US WHAT IT TAKES TO GET INTO ONE, STAYING STRONG TO THE ROOTS OF CLASSICAL DANCE WHILE STILL CATERING TO THE NEEDS OF THE COLLEGE ATMOSPHERE AND COMPETITION.



Aishwarya Sriraman was initiated into Bharatanatyam by her Guru Smt. Meena Rajagopal at the age of 6. She grew up performing at multiple events in the Triangle area and completed her arangetram in 2011. Additionally, she has taken part in multiple Bharatanatyam productions in the US directed by esteemed professionals both from the US and India. As an undergraduate student, Aishwarya pursued her love for dance as a choreographer and dancer on NC State's very own Indian classical dance team, **NCSU Thandav** and was a dancer on **NCSU Nazaare** as well. She is currently pursuing her love for the arts as a resident musician and dancer with the **SAPAN Institute**, a performing arts company based out of Washington, DC.

## THE DESI DANCE NETWORK (DDN) INCLUDES SEVERAL DIFFERENT DANCE STYLES, INCLUDING THE INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE FORMS. HOW HAS THIS NETWORK ALLOWED YOU TO GROW AS A DANCER AND/OR CHOREOGRAPHER?

*My initial exposure to DDN was through my college's fusion team, NCSU Nazaare. The challenge of doing a fusion routine was the pressure to execute multiple styles with proper technique, a concept that both my captains believed in and that I really respected. It was during this time that I got to explore and stretch my limits as a dancer. I came onto the team with a Bharatanatyam-heavy background, but being thrown in the deep end of learning hip hop, contemporary, Bhangra, etc challenged me to critically think about how I move and how I use my body to tell a story. I was then able to **apply what I had learned about movement and storytelling** as a choreographer on the Indian Classical dance team, NCSU Thandav. I had so much fun learning how to tell stories using all that I had learned till date, and that experience has **fundamentally changed the way I approach dance and art.***

## HOW DIFFERENT IS LEARNING CHOREOGRAPHY ON YOUR DANCE TEAM AS OPPOSED TO THE TRADITIONAL LEARNING UNDER YOUR GURU?

*While everyone's experiences are different, I can mention some differences that I personally noted. For me, learning choreography on a dance team of peers and a traditional Guru-shishya relationship were **different atmospheres.***

*Dance class with my Guru Smt. Meena Rajagopal was my time to be a sponge, absorbing everything she said and did so I didn't miss anything. Everything she taught me came from a **place of wisdom and insight into the art form** that comes from immersing oneself in it for years, a depth that I sometimes felt get lost in the pressures of preparing a competition-ready piece.*



*However, **learning and doing choreography on Thandav** tested my creative limits and opened up a new journey of storytelling for me to explore. The team atmosphere was also different in that we were all equals, no matter our background and experience level; when it came to learning choreography, we were all learning it and being challenged by it for the first time together.*

**IN RECENT YEARS, CLASSICAL TEAMS HAVE BEEN VENTURING INTO SOCIAL TOPICS (GUN VIOLENCE, FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS, ETC.) THROUGH DANCE. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES IN EFFECTIVELY DELIVERING THESE MESSAGES TO THE GENERAL AUDIENCE, AND ESPECIALLY THROUGH CLASSICAL DANCE, WHICH PREDOMINANTLY IS ROOTED IN MYTHOLOGY OR ANCIENT STORIES?**

*"One of the most important parts of delivering any message to the audience is having a **clear big-picture idea on the message** you want to deliver. This entails crafting every tiny detail in the piece (characters, segments, story progression) around that idea to create a coherent story. The challenge is that both choreographers and dancers must be intentional with every step, every move, and every formation change and how they support the story. While choreographers of a piece are attuned to this idea, they must also communicate it to their teammates in such a way that each person is able to **channel that intent in their execution**. If each person understands how they support the idea, the story becomes more powerful and audience can feel what you are trying to tell them.*

**WHILE ON THE TEAM, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT THINGS YOU HAVE LEARNED ABOUT TEAMWORK, CREATIVITY, AND LEADERSHIP, AND HOW HAVE THEY BEEN USED IN YOUR LIFE POST GRADUATION?**

*"Being on Thandav taught me a lot about **group dynamics**, specifically about the power of a common cause or passion and how it can be used to unite people. While we were together and dancing, we were united towards creatively expressing ourselves through dance and worked as a team to do that; every day at practice was an opportunity to learn from each other and push each other. It is critical that every member of a team, leader or not, must treat their teammates with **respect and be willing to listen** to each other. This is one of the main things I try to practice on a daily basis.*

**WHAT DID YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT THE CIRCUIT? AND, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THOSE LOOKING TO JOIN?**

*"I really enjoyed competition weekends! In spite of all of the stress that came with competition weekend, I had so much fun meeting people on other teams and was inspired watching their routines. Competition weekends always brought me and my **teammates closer together**, and some of my most cherished memories of college are from them. For anyone looking to join, I would advise that they go into it with the intention of having fun and of **exploring their creativity, competition aside**.*









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Thanks for reading & we hope you liked getting to know the various artists  
a little more than when you started.

We are asking for folks to send in their "letters to the editor",  
so if you would like to contribute,  
do email us.

Next issue will be released on March 21st 8:00 PM EST. It will be for subscription only.

Happy Dancing!

Don't forget to follow us where you are most comfortable.  
We are on Instagram, Youtube, Facebook and our website.

Team Tandavam

