



CULTURATI

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Dr Sethi has been writing on the arts scene in India and the world for three decades. She has a doctorate on the link between dance and politics, with the Sattriya dance form of Assam as a case study.

Nilimma has been creative simply to communicate the subtle 'rasa', 'atman' ideas to US audience more attuned, to body attitude than philosophical thought

Dance: The childhood love that became Nilimma's life

The travails of the partition, and her mother's determination to give her daughter a chance to partake of the divinity in dance, started the US-based Kuchipudi dancer on a life-long journey in dance

She has been recorded by the National Heritage Foundation as part of their documentation of the cultural wealth of the united States of America and has been a member for six years of the Maryland State Arts Council. She teaches a popular course at George Washington University on "Gender in Indian Dance" and was awarded the Lifetime Pola Nirenka Award for Dance by Washington Performing Arts in 2015. And yet, Nilimma Devi's dance life began with the pain and sadness of the partition of India.

Her father was the Trade Commissioner and Director of Industries in Peshawar credited to have started the Blankets and fruit canning industry there, in response to the needs for the British forces during World War II. When he felt that things were roughing up in 1947 he sent his wife and two young daughters to the home of this mother-in-law in Ferozepur, and soon went underground himself, to save his life.

With so many rendered homeless after partition, their home in Ferozepur became a 'serai' of sorts, with cousins, second cousins, cousins of cousins and complete strangers living together, in an attempt to deal with the trauma of partition and rebuild their lives. "I remember all of us children would get together and perform the Ramlila to keep ourselves amused. That is my earliest memory of my performance life". That year Ferozepur saw terrible floods and an acute shortage of food. Nilimma Devi recalls the dropping of food packages by airplanes. She also recalls the terrible hunger she felt, a memory that still

made her eyes moist up. The family with great difficulty moved to Delhi and ten of them lived in one room in old Delhi.

Her mother loved poetry and despite the fact that everything around them still spoke of loss, her mother would send Nilimma and her sister Rashma, walking, all the way to Bengali Market, chaperoned by the old family retainer, to learn dance from the renowned Kathak dancer Uma Sharma's uncle. Their forays in dance were met with patriarchal disapproval for every time they were "asked to dance in family settings, my grandfather would leave the room immediately and only re-enter very late. I think it was just my mother's determination to see us dance, an activity that she described as divine that saw us continue," admits Devi.

This early training in Kathak stood the sisters in good stead for when their father became the first trade commissioner of independent India, posted to the first Embassy that India set up, which was in Afghanistan, the two sisters would perform every year on Independence Day. Their fare consisted of what they had learnt in Kathak class and a patriotic song choreographed by their aunt who had learnt some dance at Lady Irwin College, taught by none other than Zohra Sehgal and her sister Uzra Mumtaz. "We became some kind of child celebrities" reminisces Devi in her home in Silver Springs, Maryland. In fact, the well known film production house of the Shoreys made a documentary film "Jashn-e- Istaqlal" — the "Celebration of Independence" which has an excerpt of the two little girls as they danced on India Day in Kabul. This was shown repeatedly then as part of the newsreel that came before a film show!



On one visit home from Kabul they returned to their old haunt- the dance class in Bengali market and though the old teacher had passed on, Uma Sharma and her sister Rama were preparing to put up a show of folk dances. They were invited to join in and with their father's permission performed a Rajasthani dance and a dance from the Kulu region. But as the memories of their grandfather's disapproval were still fresh, they gave their name not as Nilimma and Rashma Sapra but as Nilimma and Rashma Devi. "My sister went on to become a doctor but I retained this name for my dance career" explains Nilimma Devi with a mysterious twinkle in her eyes.

In much of her young life, Nilimma Devi moved as her father's career took her. Poor health led him to a job in Kanpur where she continued dance training at the local Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. "My most enduring memory of Kanpur is dancing the role of Yashodhara, in a production on Buddha. I did a good job, and the poet of the work, wrote me a note that advised me never to sit on my laurels and immediately strive to move ahead. That has remained my motto throughout my life" explains Devi still very active, still dancing and planning ahead.

Following the trajectory of her

father's career Devi next moved to Bangalore where she learnt some Bharatanatyam from the Chhaya sisters, and then to Hyderabad. It was here at the age of sixteen that serious training under Dr. Nataraj Ramakrishnan commenced. "He taught me Bharatanatyam and not Andhra Natyam, but it was different from what I had learnt from the Chhaya sisters. He himself was a non Brahmin and so was an exemplar of non Brahmin artistry. Perhaps it was for this reason that he was so welcoming of my desire to learn and so ready to explain things to me," said Devi.

In one such conversation, he explained that the Kautavams he had a penchant for teaching, were very old compositions of the repertoire set in rare and old talas. "The Vinayak Kautavam was arranged in the Vinayak tala, a cycle of which went into 72 beats. Today regrettably I find that people have simplified it into an eight beat Aditala cycle but that is not how the right emphasis comes," explains Nilimma Devi bemoaning the intra-generational loss of cultural knowledge.

At Nataraj Ramakrishnan's Devi had the privilege of learning from the Rajanartaki or court dancer of the erstwhile princely state of Bobbili. "She had a beautiful voice, but a harsh tongue. However, unlike others I showed her utmost respect and she shared her art generously with me. She also told me stories of her life, including the fact that she caught the eye of the king when merely twelve years old" recalled Nilimma of a time few know about.

Her training in the repertoire of Kuchipudi happened under the thorough tutelage of Sumathy Kaushal, Jagannath Sharmah and Vedantam Prahlad Sharma. From these masters Nilimma Devi learnt rare and exciting Tarangams that conclude with the plate dance, a defining item of Kuchipudi. She also learnt the masterly poetic

and dramatic presentations of 'Bhama Kalapam' and 'Ardhanarishwara', the hallmark of advanced training. From the traditional master Setu Bhagwatulu she learnt 'Gola Kalapam' and the importance of the dialogic treatment in Kuchipudi. From the Andhra Natakam veteran "who despite being a handsome and macho man, performed the feminine roles with aplomb, I learnt the power of the look" exclaimed Nilimma Devi excitedly as if reliving the thrill of being a student. "Abhinaya intensives with Kalanidhi Narayanan gave me the analytical tools including the word imagery and psyche of the text in a poem, in order to make it visual".

Working with prominent American choreographers like Daniel Burkholder on the ecological project, "My Ocean is Never Blue", triggered Nilimma's desire to provoke questions. Current socio-political events became the context for what is, a newly emergent Kuchipudi. She said that her fidelity to the form is unabated: "The lyrical beauty of this dance is going to last forever. What I am doing is simply to bring out its power in terms of meaning as a modern communication to people of all backgrounds. Kuchipudi is a vehicle for change...people are yearning for transformation in ideas as well as reality."

In the ensuing years she has danced at some of the most prestigious venues in India and in the USA and has performed both, traditional repertoires as well as modern works, including "Walking the Sky" based on the poetry of the feminist mystic poet Mahadevi Akka, "Mandala: A Voyage Within" based on the poetry in Pali written by a Buddhist nun, "The Gossamer of the Soul", based on the poetry of Kabir, and the twin works- "From the Diary of Sita" and "Sita the Gentle Warrior", which relook at Sita's quiet strength and feminist resistance. In the entirety of her work, Nilimma Devi has served as a bridge between the land of her childhood and training and the land, thousands of miles away, that she now calls home.

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