

# The Statesman

PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT, ALWAYS IN SESSION

## A tradition of values

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It was a pleasure to meet Shila Mehta, the renowned Kathak exponent, choreographer, author and a competent teacher, in the US, where she was conducting a Kathak workshop at the Marigold Dance Studio, New Jersey (NJ). Shila's annual Kathak dance workshops overseas have become so popular that she had to open branches of her reputed institution, Nupur Zankar, in a number of continents apart from India. Established originally in Kolkata more than three decades ago as a registered charitable trust devoted to promoting Indian classical music and dance, Nupur Zankar has branches today in the US, the UK and Germany, apart from Mumbai, in India. The philosophy of Nupur Zankar is deeply rooted in Guru-Shishya Parampara, striving to educate not only in the arts but also the values of Indian culture.

The founder and artistic director of Nupur Zankar Academy of Performing Arts and Research Center, Shila firmly believes in Guru-Shishya Parampara, the unique Indian tradition that has kept our rich cultural heritage alive till date. She knows it by her own personal experience because she was initiated into Kathak by Guru Prahlad Das and was further groomed under Gurus like Pt Vijay Shankar, Pt Birju Maharaj and Pt Suresh Talwalkar. Bestowed with artistic eloquence and grace, professionally trained under such reputed stalwarts and well-equipped with a Masters degree in Fine Arts, Shila has created the innovative concept of "Charani Kathak" and "Chaitanya Yoga". She talked about all this in detail, when we met recently in New Jersey.

Elaborating upon Guru Shishya Parampara she reiterated, “I have always believed in the essence of this system and have been moved by its strength in yielding long term positive effects. To me this Parampara helps in imbibing values, building up a strong bond between the Guru and disciples irrespective of caste, creed, religion and nationality. The idea behind my recent production Kathak Beyond Boundaries was to pay tribute to this great tradition by bringing together Indian and overseas disciples of mine, who show reverence to this Parampara.

In response to my query about the “Charani Kathak”, Shila explained, “It is simply the ‘Charani Sahitya’ (literature) in motion. Gujarat has a wealth of this kind of literature. Charani Kathak is an innovation largely based on my research work on Charan Parampara of Gujarat. Indian folk culture has always inspired me for its energy and exuberance, especially the Naad of Charani Sahitya. This Naad, that resonates in Charan Parampara, has enthused me to introduce this Sahitya to Kathak. My endeavour became easier because of the presence of similar elements found in both these storytelling forms.”

An accomplished performer, Shila has mesmerised audiences both as a soloist and as a group choreographer. If she excels as a soloist with her technical precision and moving “abhinaya”, her group choreographies have portrayed innovative ideas through dynamic presentations, including 1,500 dancers on stage at a time. She has authored Practicals in Kathak Dance to enable her students master the grammar and technique of Kathak. She has also released an audio CD of Kathak Dance Music that comes handy to her disciples at home and abroad for practice and performance purposes.

In 2009, Shila was one of the seven International Fellows invited by the International Society for the Performing Arts (ISPA) conference in New York, which was attended by delegates from 35 countries. She received the Overseas Natya Award, Texas, apart from many accolades in India like Nrtiya Praveen, Outstanding Group of Young Persons Award, Senior Fellowship and Kala Gurjari Award. She performed solo Kathak recitals in 17 cities in Germany recently under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) series Culture on Wheels. Shila has collaborated with artists from diverse dance genres, including contemporary and Flamenco dance. To explore concepts such as site-specific dance and dance therapy, she has been working with York University, Toronto, Canada.

Shila talked about her passion and philosophy of teaching dance as a medium for self- discovery and growth. She firmly believes that engagement in the arts affords both physical and spiritual benefits. Shila summed up, “I consider dance as a medium to connect with our inner self. It is my firm belief that dance and spirituality are intertwined. Dance is an effective instrument for self development. I am proud to pursue my passion for dance by teaching in the US, Belgium and the UK besides India, with an earnest intention to inculcate strong values in my disciples.”

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