

DANCE

The different shades of Ananda Shankar Jayant

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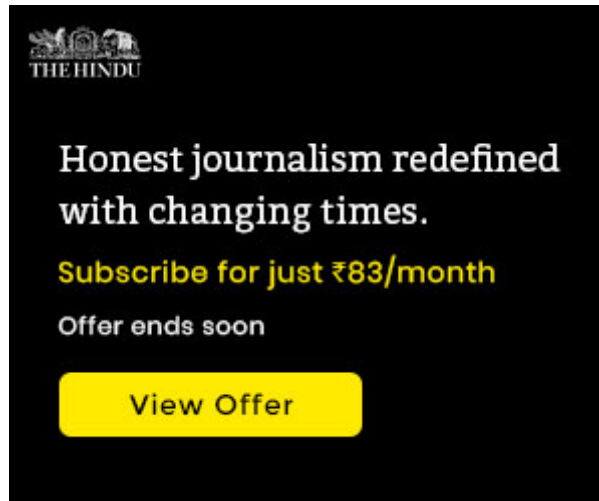
Ananda Shankar Jayant says her passion for dance has helped her take on the odds in life without missing a beat



She lives up to her name – Ananda, as she exudes happiness. Get to know her a little, and one realises that ‘inspiration’ could well be her second name. A classical dancer, scholar, senior bureaucrat, speaker and winner of numerous awards including the Sangeet Natak Academy award and the Padma Shri, Ananda Shankar Jayant was introduced to dance at the age of four, backed by the enthusiasm of her musically-trained mother. Ananda made dance her core strength with her decision to join Kalakshetra. She was in Thiruvananthapuram in connection with a dance performance. Edited excerpts from a conversation

Why did you decide to join Kalakshetra? What was the experience like and how has it shaped you?

During a summer vacation that we spent with my grandparents in Chennai, my mother took me on a rather impulsive visit to Kalakshetra to meet Rukmini Devi Arundale. I was 11 then and I still vividly remember that image of the grand dame with flowing silver hair and dressed in a maroon sari. She asked me to perform a few *adavus* and soon pronounced that I could join Kalakshetra as a full-time student. I too fell in line with this decision. But when I announced this to my father, he was dismayed, to put it mildly! Here I was, a high-performing student, with my sight set on becoming a doctor. This sudden turn-around made my father fear if I would become a school drop-out. I promised him I would not. I went on to complete my matriculation and pre-university, pursuing the courses alongside, privately, as that was the only option for a full-time student at Kalakshetra.



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It was a sea change for the convent school girl in pinafores and pigtailed to one in skirts and half-sari, a big bindi and flowers in her hair. However, the warmth of *Athai* (Rukmini Devi) and all the teachers completely enveloped me. There was Sharada Hoffman, Shankara Menon Sir, Neela Satyalingam, Krishnaveni Laxman, Janardanan and Jaya Teacher, who was like a mother.

During the six years, through which I completed my diploma and PG diploma in Bharatanatyam, I realised that Kalakshetra shapes you very differently. Through a holistic learning method, it exposes you to a million things from theory, to choreography, to lighting on stage – a lot of it through a process of assimilation. Along with aesthetics and balance, it teaches you to see art not just as performance or career, but to have it impact your life in its entirety. To me that has been the biggest takeaway from my training at Kalakshetra.

When you took up a career as a bureaucrat, were you confident about pursuing a parallel career in dance? Have these two mutually helped each other in any way?

Having graduated from Kalakshetra at the age of 17, I began to teach and perform. But I soon realised that a career in dance called for economic stability. So I decided to become academically qualified. I joined Osmania University and did my Masters in Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology. I got an MPhil in Art History with the 'Role of Kalakshetra in the development of Bharatanatyam', as my topic. I sat for the Union Public

Service Commission Exams and was placed in the Indian Railway Traffic Service, which was a male-dominated domain.

I was the first woman officer of the South Central Railways and I continue to be in this service as a senior officer. But right at the beginning of my new role, I had resolved never to give up my dancing career, which was also a promise that my mother had extracted from me. And to this day, I continue to tread both tracks, to use a railway metaphor!

Yes, one needs to adjust, negotiate and prioritise. Sometimes the call of duty is louder than the request for a performance, which one may have to forego. But with time management, I am able to do everything related to dance.

I think most of us believe that we are meant to do only one thing well. But the trick is to figure your balance and what you can bring from one to the other. As for me, I have taken the beauty and egalitarianism of my art to the office space and from there I have brought the system and administration to my realm of art, which would otherwise have been chaotic.

Ananda Shankar Jayant | Photo Credit: [G Murali](#)

**You are a dancer, choreographer and a guru... Which of these roles do you enjoy the most?
As a guru, what message do you impart to your students?**

I love all the roles; they are all shades of the same me and one role would not be possible without the other. In our dance school, Shankarananda Kalakshetra, learning is inclusive and egalitarian. This comes to play particularly in the process of choreography, which I especially enjoy when senior students too contribute ideas and movements, which itself is an enriching part of the training.

I tell my students to never give up on their passion. One need not necessarily turn out to be a performer. But no one can stop you from making it a part of your lives, to engage with it in

ways that suit you. Make your passion your core strength and at some point in your life, this passion will come to your rescue.

You believe that classical dance is capable of conveying contemporary matters, messages and emotions. Can you describe some of your work in choreography?

Dance has been my personal spiritual journey, as well as a language I have used to narrate traditional and contemporary themes. Through dance, I have spoken on issues that have inspired, bothered or tickled me. Some of my memorable works as a choreographer include 'Thyagaraja Ramayanam', which I did as an *ekaharya* and 'What about me?', which focused on gender issues from the protagonist's perspective, juxtaposed with traditional stories. I successfully experimented with Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*, portraying the search for excellence.

To create the feeling of space and flight, I used white and wore leotards and skirt; abstracted Bharatanatyam movements were set to a compilation of jazz music. This piece received a fantastic response from even the traditional bastion of Chennai.

'Dancing Panchatantra Tales' was a production in a fun format, conveying to youngsters that the classical dance form is not alienating. 'Darshanam', on the eye, both physical and metaphysical, was a philosophical one.

I recently launched an app, Natyarambha, which enables students to practise Bharatanatyam at home and it contains all possibilities for the student and the teacher to create and share their practice schedules. So you see, my productions fall into a wide spectrum.

Conveying the power of dance is your much acclaimed TED talk about your tryst with cancer. Can you elaborate on this?

In 2008, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and after the initial shock, anger and sadness, I made three affirmations to myself – to ride it out and not let cancer ride me, to not ask "why me?", and to see it as a page, as I turn the book of my life. I made the decision to not stop dancing even through my treatment and I think that helped me deal with it. I focussed on teaching, performing and choreographing.

I gave performances while I was undergoing radiation, chemotherapy and surgery, arranged Natyakala conferences, participated in major festivals, and did ICCR's dance tour. To do this, of course, I had extraordinary support from my doctors, family and my husband, Jayant. It took my mind away from the clamour, clutter and melodrama that push you into a state of depression and, instead, helped me bring an amazing focus to my dance. So the message I give out is to continue to hold on to your passion, whatever it is, and make it your core strength, as opposed to core competency that we are all trained to pursue. Competency gives you jobs, but core strength helps you face challenges. And the business of life is to challenge you!

You have talked at the Inspire series at Harvard and other places. How do you provide inspiration?

These days I am being invited to speak at Universities, hospitals and so on to provide whatever motivation I can. And this seems to be the fallout of the TED talk having gone viral! When I speak, I realise that at the end of the day, people are looking for that spark of inspiration. There, I reiterate what I have said earlier – nurture your passion, delve into it for strength- and it does strike a chord with the audience.

Preserving our heritage

Speaking on public policy, I say that arts should be integrated with education from an early age. Education should not be offered in the strict compartments of the different streams. We should also not lose sight of our Indic traditions; because I feel that somewhere along the way, we are losing our inherent strengths. Today, we have extraordinary minds, but when it comes to social skills, there is a lacuna. Arts or humanities, in general, contribute greatly in creating holistic human beings.



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