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New directions for India from the British

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 04th June 2016 10:00 PM | Last Updated: 04th June 2016 01:52 PM

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If there is one thing that we can still learn from the British, it is their abiding commitment to everything arts and culture.

Last week, I was witness to the city of Birmingham playing host to a galaxy of artists and scholars. The superbly-equipped mac Birmingham centre was bustling with the rustle of silks, and the friendly whoops of friends from Canada, South Africa, the UK, and of course India (Tanusree Shankar, Anita Ratnam, Gauri Sharma Tripathi, Sunil Kothari, Vikram Iyengar and myself), making their way to 'Navadisha 2016', a three-day event to 'stimulate, steer and secure the future of South Asian dance'.

Produced by art leaders Anita Srivastava and Piali Ray with Chitra Sundaram as lead consultant, 'Navadisha 2016' delivered an impeccable dance industry conference.

Even as critical discourse about the value of South-Asian dance by trailblazers Shobana Jeyasingh, Faroukh Choudhary and Akram Khan formed the first tier of the conference, the second tier of arts professionals, policy makers, sector funders, dance producers and promoters provided substantive discussions on topics ranging from training, mentoring, career progression and collaborations, to new narratives, new audiences, alongside the powerful South Asian voice in dance academics. The third tier was the showcase of new generation dancers, attempting the contemporary from the base of traditional dance styles.

Extending the bar further was the brilliant session on outdoor arts by renowned art personality Mira Kaushik, even as dance inspired the inner and the interior, in the final session 'Changing Lives... Inspiring stories', where I spoke on the power of dance to overcome life's challenges.

The large gathering rose to honour veteran dance gurus Pratap Pawar, Nahid Siddiqui and Pushkala Gopal, who have imprinted Bharatanatyam and Kathak upon generations in the UK, and also felicitate the iconic Naseem Khan for her contribution to arts and policy.

That the classical dance styles of India have heeded no fences and have taken root across the world is well known, but when, as 'Navadisha' moderator Chitra Sundaram noted, "almost Bhakti-like fervour with which keynote speakers spoke of the rigour and depth of Indian classical dance and its meaningfulness to the

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human need for a spiritual space”, it makes us sit up and take notice of the sheer power and global presence of classical Indian dance.

A power has been whittled down in India, even as we package it as visual entertainment. And I wonder when will India dip into its enormous cultural and spiritual wealth of dance? How can we value the classical artforms beyond its present tokenism and sustain it for posterity? How can we fund and create new art even as we uphold the traditional? How can we nurture the presently diminished and undervalued young classical artist? How can the classical and the popular coexist in public mind space? How can we bring arts to the bargaining table? Can the classical arts seek to be MSME?

Can the arts aspire for a Swachh Bharat-like cess? Can we replicate or improve on the UK model, where the Arts Council funds a plethora of arts projects, with funds from the government and the lottery fund?

How can the Ministry of Culture and the Sangeet Natak Akademi engage with artistes to arrive at a sustainable model? Can we aspire for these new directions?

Because it is the arts that truly matter in a civilisation’s reaffirmation. We artists are also eager to say: Mera desh badal raha hai...Meri sanskriti aage badh rahi hai.

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