

Arts: Re-connecting with Nature

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Guest Editor

More than a million people have been wiped out since the Tsunami disaster on Dec 26th 2004. The lives of millions more have been changed forever. From the incessant suicide attacks in Baghdad, Iraq to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, USA; From Kashmir Earthquake in India and PoK, to London Blasts in the UK, humanity has never been in greater danger from man made and natural disasters.

The collective pain and suffering, which brought together the people on both sides of Kashmir, represents the global need to survive and live against all odds. And the year gone by presented us with some rare instances of creative spirit usurping the trauma and tragedy from the lives of the victims. Else, how does one explain the presence of a Ballet School in Baghdad, the city that has been the battleground for the terrorists and the allied forces. The re-opening of Baghdad's Music and Ballet School, The Fame Academy has provided a ray of hope to over two hundred students, some merely six years old. Shia, Sunni and Christian children have thronged the academy for a 12-year study programme that will carve out ballet dancers. Amidst the fear of lurking death, art and creativity have manifested as new protectors.

Closer home, the Tsunami, which wrecked horror and stomached many lives and many hopes became a reason to discover new bonds, cultivate friendships and forge new partnerships. The trauma faced by the victims of Tsunami led to Herculean efforts that included, collecting, following and distributing relief material on one end and ensuring that Post-Tsunami, victims could de-stress and relieve themselves of their psychological stress and suffering, any which way possible, on the other.

The entire idea of understanding the disconnect with nature and its fury to eventually making sure that people of the sea- the fishermen and the islanders, reconnected with their lifeline and source of livelihood, through their own cultural traditions, by trawling their own arts and by invoking their own will power to survive, was perhaps the best way to bring them home to the world!

It is here that leading arts organizations came forward and offered relief therapies to the victims, in and around India. The mantra being, that "arts don't just entertain, don't just titillate and distract the inner being but that, most importantly, they empower each and every one of us with new sources of strength and energy to carry on with life's daily joys and sorrows."

The efforts made by Asia Pacific Performing Arts Network (APPAN) International set up under the aegis of UNESCO, in this regard have been path breaking, especially because the

organization has added a vital chapter to the contribution of Indian performing arts in the region. Since 1999, APPAN has worked in the area of exploring the role of the arts, of music, dance, theatre, puppetry and other multi-disciplinary forms, in reducing stress and delivering a positive level of well-being and health, both to the audience and the practitioner.

Responding to the initiative by the Regional Office of UNESCO, Bangkok, UNESCO, Paris approved of a pilot project to test the above premise in the context of the tsunami disaster. APPAN was entrusted with the task of delivering post-tsunami stress therapy, initially in four Asian countries—India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Later this was cut down to two, India and Indonesia. In the words of its Chairperson, Shanta Serbjeet Singh, “We needed to be prepared for devising new and long-term strategies towards our task of helping the emotional and stress-battered victims in ways that would empower them and give them new directions in coping with their situation. This was just as well because now we have a blueprint for addressing this very deep-seated problem anywhere in the world... specially in terms of finding strategies through the performing arts which minimize polarization, by using the creative approach and the performing arts to end divisiveness in communities created by religious and economic factors.”

The role of arts in healing, is being increasingly noticed and we in India, need to acknowledge the significance of the work done in the field. Globally, arts are being used as effective tools to experiment the impact of finer impulses on a number of health complications.

It is vital here to quote an excerpt from an article, “The Healing Power of Music”, written by Karen Kim, Editor, *Healing Arts Guide*, published in the USA where she reports the power of music but is unable to explain how it actually heals:

“Music enters into the body through the ear, and the bones of the body act like a tuning fork. The neurological fields of the body are then stimulated by music. Music is a means by which all people can feel these healing vibrations and it is moving into hospitals, psychiatric facilities, and geriatric settings nationwide. Not only is music therapy being used to relax adults with Alzheimer’s disease, it is also employed to distract children during difficult procedures and to reduce patients’ anxiety before surgery. Like yoga, tai chi, and meditation, music therapy is part of a growing trend towards natural healing or complementary therapy in medicine.

Evidence indicates that music therapy reduces pain and anxiety, but it’s less clear why it works. One theory is that the sounds vibrate cells, organs, and tissue, like an internal massage. As the vibrations press on sensors close to the skin’s surface, they activate a natural pain suppressant.”

The most powerful instance of this power of music, which left an indelible stamp of human endurance of the human spirit over the devastating Hurricane Katrina and became part of world’s photographic memory, came when violinist Samuel Thompson was photographed playing Bach at Louisiana Superdome and New Orleans Convention, surrounded by evacuees and soldiers, for a fellow survivor on a wheel chair, in September 2005.

In Latin America, Venezuelan conductor, Jose Antonio Abreu took a giant leap of faith in

1975, when he decided to incorporate classical music training as a social movement, which could change the lives and fortunes of poverty struck, drug-abused children. As the time went by, he also began training special ability children. In 2005, at the end of 30 years of Abreu's dream, nearly 400,000 children had graduated from his State funded Classical Music program. Beyond that, about 240,000 artistes, some as young as two years old, were studying and performing at various orchestras, nationally and internationally! The program has been fortunately funded by every successive government and has inspired 22 Latin countries to follow suit! By 2010, Abreu, hopes to involve one million Venezuelan children.

In our backyard, recently concluded Asia's largest Singapore M1 Fringe Festival dedicated its 2006 edition to "Arts and Healing" signifying the importance, contribution and history of Asian traditions in using arts as vital movement in healing.

Fortunately, India's classical music and dance tradition have inherent scientific mechanisms that are now being discovered and understood by the scientists and art enthusiasts. Our tradition of Yogic sciences are testimony to the fact that it is possible to achieve perfect equilibrium of body, mind and soul. It is in this respect, the work of some art organizations becomes crucial for us, since they are exploring those avenues of the arts that we have known about but never implemented. Unfortunately, so far the work done by these organizations and individuals has not been effectively documented, which among other things, has also happened because of the media apathy. This special issue of Sangeet Natak is a small corrective step aimed at reporting the arduous and exciting work being done, which is all set to eventually become one of the most potent factors in building bridges between people and places across the globe. This is more so, since it is believed that as human beings divorce from nature, they will have to seek recluse in the arts, for they will increasingly become our only link in re-connecting with nature.

Only then will Tsunami birth Tsunamika, the daughter and friend of the fisherwomen of Tamil Nadu who lost their source of livelihood to the sea.

Tsunamika,
 "the memory of Tsunami...
 ... hand-made by women,
 The women who live by the ocean,
 The women whose lives changed forever after the tsunami,
 The women who are exploring a new way of living,
 The women who are empowering themselves."

Tsunamika, the doll has touched the hearts of millions of people in over thirty-five countries and has become a source of livelihood for the women devastated by Tsunami. Delhi based puppeteer Anurupa Roy's article-report, "Tsunami: Life on Strings" informs the readers how the emotions of fishermen and the skills of puppeteers came together to create the story of Tsunamika's life.

Though, the economic and social difference in the lives of the fisherwomen, post-Tsunamika, is remarkable, the contribution of the arts in our normal day lives has been no



Tsunamika: weaving the hope

less. Shanta Serbjeet Singh's lead article "Healing through Arts: Decoding the Indian Paradigm" examines the creative and scientific role of arts, their affinity with nature and the manner in which they bring a balance between the inner being and the outer universe. Through the use of traditional forms of music and dance on one end and the yogic science of dhyana or meditation on the other. Shanta reports some startling finds on meditation in her write up.

Further, dancer researcher, Kanaka Sudakhar's write up, "The Therapeutic Value of Indian Classical Dance" delineates with great clarity, the unbelievable impact of dance on the human body-be it our brain or our heart. She reveals how a dancer continues practicing accupressure without ever knowing about it! Not only that, dance leads to correct and enhanced visual perception, sequential organization and neurologic maturation. Kanaka's article squarely places dance as perhaps the ultimate remedy as she briefly informs about her on-going research on the benefits of dance on the growth of hormones.

Establishing a link with Shanta's take on meditation and its role in healing, Shruti's article, "NADA: The sound within, without" unravels the mystic and vibrational energy of NADA. Being a musicologist, she touches upon the birth of Sanskrit language through the vibration of Sound on one hand and looks at the scientific world of chanting of the vedic mantras on the other.

Representing the voice of young healers, Chennai based, dancer-choreographer, Sangeeta Isvaran's report on her experiences in the APPAN-UNESCO Project of trying to reconnect the people of Nias in Indonesia, with their traditional art forms, in "Locating Nias through India" shows the ways in which arts can help reduce bitterness and tension among the survivors especially when they belong to different communities.

From Indonesia, to Singapore, this issue of Sangeet Natak carries an interview with theatre personality Alvin Tan, who is a co-director, of the Singapore M1 Fringe Festival. Alvin informs how he and his team members are using theatre, as a medium of social healing.

Another interview, which explores the less covered area of Andaman and Nicobar islands, brings us face to face with the extremities of situations, where the islanders, some of whom, insulated from the world, are coping with their situation in a Post-Tsunami world. Theatre activist and a pro-active art therapist, Syed Sallauddin Pasha, speaks about his stress relief therapy workshops at the Islands and the life changing experiences he had.

Pasha also informs about his work with children with special abilities, which also happens to be the area of Dr. Ambika Kameshwar's work. Ambika writes from her personal space in "Natyasastra at RASA" talking briefly about her journey, the creation of her organization RASA and some basic skills being used to help these children.

Last but not the least, is a detailed and thought provoking excerpt, "Special dance for special children" culled from Tripura Kashyap Penguin India publication, "my body, my wisdom" that not only looks at dance therapy for children with special abilities but also for people suffering from mental disorders such as schizophrenia.

At Sangeet Natak Akademi's awards function for the year 2005, President A P J Abdul

Kalam, spoke at length about the means by which music is being used to heal patients of psychological and other mental disorders. His views in fact, became a touchstone for the SNA to bring out this special issue, which celebrates the healing power of arts not only on the victims of tragedies and catastrophes but also in our daily lives and the role they play in addressing the clinical disorders that people with special abilities face.

One hopes that this issue serves the purpose it was conceived for and that readers come forward with their stories on how arts have healed their lives.

I am grateful to SNA for inviting me to edit this special issue and for also giving me a free hand in selecting the theme, content and the design for the same.

Long live our arts...

