

The Show Must Go On

Habitat Center, July 17th, 2005, New Delhi. On stage tonight is the graduating class of Odissi dancers. A class of about 10 girls, between 5 and 12 years old, dressed in doll outfits with flowers in their hair, henna feet and hands, bangles galore, red outfits, white bells and belts, exaggerated eye make up with Kohl, dancing the Odissi Tradition from the State of Orissa. Under the watchful eyes of their teacher, they try to mirror each others' steps, strike temple poses, roll their eyes left and right, right and left, their attempts to coordinate not too successful but an ensemble that must be the cutest spectacle possible.

Habitat Center, July 20th. A sitar concert performed by a modest middle aged woman accompanied by a funky looking young man with square glasses on the Tabla. The wide trunk of the sitar held diagonally hides most of the woman. Only one of her eyes, half of a nose, and her bindi are visible. Behind the trunk she closes her serene eyes in rapture over her music. When she does open her eyes, it is to look at her Master, in reference and in reverence. The Master yells out instructions during the concert. "louder" he urges his students, quite loudly himself. Claps his hand to remind the Tabla player of the rhythm he may have lost, and eternally shakes his head in a sign that can be interpreted as both "enough" and "good". *Tikh he.*

The cold air conditioner once in a while blows the sweet smell of a fart your way, often at a regular interval, less you feel too raptured in spirit-lifting music. WKD: Weapons of Keif Destruction.

Yet the show must go on.

Every once in a while, a member of the audience expresses his (as men are usually emboldened to express pleasure loudly) satisfaction with a "vah" and a "vah vah". A thirtysomething mouse of a man enters the hall, takes off his shoes, sits cross-legged on a straw mat thrown on the floor. He is a small man, not greedy, only takes from this world the minimum for himself, a tiny man who weights perhaps no more than 45 kilos. What he does take is music, which he inhales deeply, making him sway back and forth. Sitting there, the mouse of the man, cross-legged and straight-backed, modest enough not to spread his legs beyond his mat in this world. He takes only as much as necessary. The epitome of sagesse.

The shishi artsy world of art gallery openings in Delhi. this time an exhibition of figurines made of cow dung in a store over "The Shop" in Connaught Place. Slightly less snobbish than the usual art gallery scene in Desiland, to be expected when the art in question is.... Bullshit. I bet no artist works with that material in his/her Gurgeon studio, so the job is left to two illiterate villagers, described in a promotional video as "ordinary landless poor household in Rajasthan who now learned a creative skill to tell their life history". So it was that Mr. and Mrs. formerly-landless-couple Singh stood over their beige creations, eager to talk to anyone who would listen to the stories of their lives in the village through the artifacts (i.e., a hut, a woman giving birth, elections in the village, a

wedding, and a mighty heavy mini cow that Mr. Singh lifted and put in my arms). I would have listened but we had no language in common. So I muttered something like: *Hindi ma'lum ne he, but your art very tikh he*, before going off to join the hordes at the bar, where the landed/landfull creative Delhiites, feeling proud that they were contributing to income generation in rural India, were gulping down mighty good mojitos, whiskey, red and white wine, and trays of cheese, hummus, brownies, meat patties and samsas, enough to feed a village. All this surrounded by quite original bullshit, a luxury to find new creative handicrafts. Bless the entrepreneur who came up with this idea.

I had never seen.... until I saw in India

I had never seen a giant snail before. Or a child throwing a brick at a dog on a leash as I saw in Bangalore. I had never laid on a hammock and watched birds construct a nest above on the tree. Never seen an elderly woman in a yellow sari doing Yoga on the grass at Lodi Gardens at 6:30 am before, or a middle aged Sardarji with a bright pink turban and bright pink blouse eat an ice cream with multicolored sparkles. I had never seen small babies, maybe one year old, maybe older but so thin they looked that much, sitting calmly behind their dads on a bicycle, where I would normally tie my books. I had never seen for that matter a man wearing a protective helmet on his head on a motorcycle, with his sari-clad wife sitting on a side behind him and a 2-3 year old kid between them, both kid and wife not wearing any protective helmet.. I had never seen so many heavenly gorgeous women as there are on the screens of Bollywood movies, MTV clips and pages of Delhi Times. I'd never heard people speak their language on TV or in Government speeches with complete half sentences or words in English thrown in completely naturally. This of course makes watching TV an easy task for non-Hindi speakers. I had never been to a talk that started at 10 pm and ended at 2 am as it did when Tariq Ali spoke at JNU in front of thousands of students. I had never seen or heard a "laughing club", a group of men and women gathering 7 am at Lodhi Gardens for the sole purpose of laughing loudly and collectively for a health kick. I had never seen so many Marxist and anti-imperialist slogans on the walls of a student cafeteria as there are in Jawaharlal Nehru University. Never heard so many speakers denounce American policies at a conference and then hitch a ride to the American Embassy for a party afterwards. I had never been to a movie that starts at 11 pm, has an intermission at 1.00 am exactly when the hero dies, and then goes on till 3 am before the wife of the hero finds someone else to love legally. I was never asked my name nor where I was from by a Rikshaw driver, just asked to move center or my weight would topple the three-wheeler to its side. I never before had seen women in complete Shalwar Kameez get on a treadmill and run for 30 minutes then do stationary bike and lift weighs, all without losing their Dupatta (long scarf worn back to front). Never seen so many small kids begging while holding babies as small as dolls. Never seen a park or sidewalk with so many thin men and beige dogs sleeping at any hour of the day as if the world had come to a standstill. Or never heard mobiles being used so much for calling one's driver, who always happens to be 20 meters away, as one leaves a party, or for calling one's daughter to make sure she is on her way home before you get home at 1:00 am.

I'd never been so much in awe of a nation as I keep being of India.