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NILAM PESINAL AND A PLASTIC FREE CHENNAI: Q&A WITH JANANI RAMESH

Welcome to *Brindavani's* first featured article! This feature kicks off our initiative to highlight service and community building through Carnatic music. We interviewed Janani Ramesh, a budding Bharathanatyam dancer and Carnatic vocalist who has performed for *Brindavani* events in the past. Janani has done some fantastic work with *Nilam Pesinal*, an innovative dance production with a unique service aspect.

Tell us about the concept behind Nilam Pesinal and the plastic-free Chennai initiative.

Nilam Pesinal, which translates to "If Mother Earth Could Speak", is a Bharatanatyam dance production by Indisha Fine Arts which seeks to bring awareness to the human impact on the environment in the "voice of Mother Earth.

How does the narrative of the show unfold?

With the belief that a conversation can lead to insight, we listened to Mother Earth's story through the voice of jhalam (water), as she connects us to the emotions and thoughts of Mother Earth through the ages. We first see Mother Earth as a peaceful abode of beautiful oceans, majestic mountains, and clean lands, where all living beings coexist in harmony. Initially, mankind honors, loves and values Mother Nature. However,as civilization progresses, man finds creative ways to use the resources provided by Mother Earth, ultimately losing his innocence.
Man's love for his

ABOUT JANANI RAMESH

Janani Ramesh is a junior in the Pre-Medical program at Austin College (Sherman, TX), pursuing a Biology Major and Music minor. She began her music venture with the guidance of her mother. She continues her training under Kalaimamani Smt. Charumathi Ramachandran, an eminent torchbearer of the GNB/MLV "Bani". Janani has won numerous prizes in Cleveland and local competitions, and has given concerts both in the US and in India. Janani is also a keen student of Bharathanatyam in the esteemed Kalakshetra bani, and is currently a student of a Kalakshetra alumni couple, Smt. Indu Nidheesh and Sri Nidheesh Kumar, directors of Indisha Fine Arts - Chennai. She is grateful to her teachers, friends, and well-wishers for their guidance and encouragement in learning these beautiful art forms.

mother is replaced with lust and greed, giving way to selfishness. Scientific inventions and discoveries, while advantageous in the beginning, ultimately cause man to ignore the harm and torture he is inflicting upon mother earth, leading to further depletion and destruction of her once beautiful form.

A parallel thought of the role of women in society emerges to depict ways in which women were initially loved, respected, and considered a symbol of divinity. Slowly women began losing their identity through the rituals and customs that define the union of men and women through marriage. Man treats her unfairly, and his attitude of superiority also causes him to treat Mother Earth in the same ways, exploiting her for his benefit. He gains more ego by building factories, mines, buildings, bridges, etc, and grossly misuses Mother Earth's natural resources, which is fueled further by the monetary profits he sees.

This soon creates further stratification within the human race, subjecting certain individuals to inferior lifestyles and exacerbating inequality. Religion, politics, social hierarchies, and land disputescause violence within the human race, which further deplete Mother Earth's mental and emotional state.

When Mother Earth realizes the hopelessness of man's inconsiderate acts, she unintentionally releases her frustration in the form of natural disasters. Although much of Nilam Pesinal portrays Mother Earth in a tortured state, the final scene is one of hope in which man realizes his foolishness and pleads to Mother Earth for forgiveness. The show concludes with a message from Mother Earth advising mankind that harming nature for his benefit will only cause more suffering for his own kind. The conversation leaves the audience longing for Mother Earth's original form, encouraging mankind to see the urgency of changing his ways.

In addition to conveying their message through the art, Indisha wanted to incorporate something hands-on to make a change. Hence, Plastic Free Chennai was born. We've all noticed the excessive use of single-use plastic bags throughout the world. In India, they often end up on the streets, in the beach, stuck in trees, etc, contributing significantly to pollution as well as posing danger to terrestrial and marine animal life. To reduce plastic waste in Chennai, we seek to replace plastic bags with newspaper bags, which are both environmentally friendly and cost-effective.

What sparked the idea to pursue something like this?

Since I'm not a choreographer of the production, it's hard for me to pinpoint what truly sparked this idea. According to my gurus, it was by simply looking around, something we all don't do as often as we should. Their generation grew up in and around nature much more than we do today. Nevertheless, we've all experienced nature in its pure beauty at some place and time. Reflecting on how Mother Nature is under assault today has made us fear for what the future will hold. Our gurus especially feel afraid for future generations that may never get to see the beauty of the world, since all of us will potentially destroy every bit of it before they even get a glimpse. This is why they've been keen to involve as many people from our generation in Nilam Pesinal and Plastic Free Chennai, because future generations will shape what is to come. From dancers to videographers to the admin team of Indisha, we have used the involvement of younger aspirants of the arts who see value in this endeavour.

How are the youth as a whole getting involved in this plastic-free initiative?

Indisha reached out to many Chennai dance schools to by sharing a tutorial video instructing how to make a bag. So far they've collected almost 4,000 handmade newspaper bags, primarily from students. Our goal is 10,000 bags, but this is just an initial goal. We hope to make this an ongoing project and supply regularly to as many stores as we can. I decided to take responsibility of providing 5,000 bags from the USA, made by students here. I've reached out to colleges, religious organizations, and dance and music schools to continue the tradition they have started so beautifully in Chennai. As president of Indian Cultural Association and an executive member of my college's Service Station, I am spearheading this effort on our campus. Another friend is leading this through her Circle Kiwanis group at UT Austin. Coincidentally, this year's Earth Day mission at our school is to "End Plastic Pollution," so we are also planning some earth day festivities with this project through my mother's shloka/music school, our Dallas community, and the Dallas Sai Center. We hope to involve as many people as possible, particularly youth involved in the arts!

What has been your primary role in the project thus far?

I've had the wonderful opportunity to work alongside my gurus and fellow Indisha students in organizing Nilam Pesinal. Our gurus, Smt. Indu and Sri Nidheesh, allowed us to experience both the creative and practical aspects of putting the show together while making sure to never lose sight of its overarching purpose. Their passion moved me to invest my time and effort in this innovative production. My most significant involvement was writing the Suthradhaar (narration) script that connects the audience to each scene. I saw ideas evolve into a cohesive story in which the narrator, jhalam (water), tells the story of bhoomi devi (Mother Nature). The trust my gurus had in me to contribute something this crucial to the show still astounds me. I am no writer, but their encouragement brought out a side in myself I didn't know existed. The hours spent writing and working towards this goal of relaying environmental issues through dance brought Nilam Pesinal and Plastic Free Chennai very close to my heart. I ultimately felt a responsibility to involve more of my friends and fellow students in the US into Plastic Free Chennai.

How does this project connect to Brindavani's goals as outlined in our mission statement?

I've seen that Brindavani seeks to empower the youth in Carnatic music to connect and contribute to a larger purpose, and Indisha's efforts are arguably identical. Bharatanatyam youth have started this initiative and come together to preserve Mother Earth. The values that our art has taught us has made all of us leaders in our own right. Our art family is beautiful, impactful, and powerful. We are a family that strengthens one another through our art, morals and traditions. Just like Brindavani and Indisha, I believe that if we unify, we can contribute to larger purposes in a more meaningful way. Power in numbers and passion.

An increasing number of Indian dance and music schools are beginning to take interest in the plastic-free Chennai campaign. Do you think this will alter the goals of the undertaking or your approach to it?

The more interest and involvement we have, the more we can achieve! 5,000 bags is just a minimum goal; I hope we can just raise the bar higher and higher. I do not believe my approach to it will change, but I am always open to ideas in helping it reach more people. I hope it will turn into a sustainable long-term project especially for many Indian music and dance schools across the country.

In the long-term, what do you envision this initiative becoming? What do you view as its ultimate objective?

I hope local organizations in the U.S continue this effort and show that students and aspiring artists can accomplish a great deal with their communities and have a social responsibility to do so. The ultimate objective would be a robust, sustainable framework in Chennai. Through sponsorships and donations, we would provide orphanages, homes, shelters, and low-income schools with materials to make the bags and would pay them for their time and effort. We would then sell them to local stores to continue the flow of resources required in the making and distribution of these bags around Chennai. In this way, we contribute to the economic wellbeing of downtrodden communities while promoting a worthy environmental cause. We also hope to present Nilam Pesinal in schools to reach the minds of the Indian youth so they can make environmentally responsible decisions. This is an ever-evolving idea that continues to take new shapes and forms, and we hope to continue to develop these ideas as a sustainability project both for underprivileged citizens and for our now underprivileged planet.

Do you have any advice for youth in our community seeking to embark on similar service projects in the future?

I don't believe I'm qualified to give advice, but my suggestion is to keep your eyes on the bigger purpose that is much greater than us all. If we are genuinely passionate about something and do not focus on popularity or personal benefits, our purpose will reach the hearts of many. The important thing is to keep it alive in your own heart, and your passion will be obvious and move people to help others in the world. This is the way I imbibed the passion from my gurus, and I hope others will get such opportunities to find their passion, be inspired, and inspire others.