

UNITY THROUGH DIVERSITY: THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF RHYTHM

Presented by New Acropolis Culture Circle Mumbai





Unity of all mankind may seem at first a lofty and utopian concept, but the actualization of this intention is perhaps the realization of one principle: recognition and respect for the diversity of the human race. We must understand each other, honour each other's cultural identity, and value each other's way of life.

To attempt to bridge the gap between distant geographies and distinct traditions, to engender an appreciation of the astounding treasure-trove of knowledge, encompassing arts and science, customs and traditions, and the mythologies and belief-systems, that make up our rich and varied multi-dimensional universe, New Acropolis explores and celebrates the idea of Unity Through Diversity.



Towards this end, New Acropolis Culture Circle Mumbai, hosted Kathak Exponent Aditi Bhagwat who is also passionate about *Lavani*, and Flamenco Dancer Bettina Castano to present and discuss their unique dance forms and explore the Universal Language of Rhythm. Here are excerpts from the free-flowing conversation which took place between presentations of the various techniques and styles of dance, which served to illustrate the essence of the discussion.

Culture Circle: Rhythm unites all life, because everything in life moves in a harmonious relationship of time and space, very much like dance.

Aditi: Isn't movement integral to all of us? Even right now, everyone is moving in some or the other way, right? Nobody is ever steady. Movement suggests life, it suggests growth. And we all must move to feel alive. Where does this movement begin within us? Any guesses? The heart. That's the first thing that moves, which suggests life. And that is where rhythm is born within all of us, a very basic one- two beat, the beat that we first learn in classical as well as folk dance.

Over time, as the complexity of beats increased we needed a way to express and memorise these rhythms. So, a specific language was born from the language of the sound of the *tabla*. Sounds got codified, written, and documented. That's when Indian music and dance became more sophisticated, documenting notations and mathematical formulae for creating and recreating rhythm.

Here we were treated to an explanation and demonstration of the synchronisation of the language of rhythm of the tabla and Aditi's ghungaroots, or ankle bells. As Aditi's feet flew faster and faster keeping perfect pace, the ghungaroots served to accentuate the rhythm of the dance and allow her complex footwork to be heard by the audience.

CC: Unity in rhythm is not just in these beautiful classical dance forms or music, but they are also in the movements of the universe which align to an order, a rhythm, which form a bigger picture. Each single movement, each single rhythm is part of the formation of the entire universe. And perhaps our role, since we are part of nature, is also to find this movement and find our rhythm, one that unites with this universal rhythm.

Aditi: Yes and this next piece I composed especially as a reflection of the speed of life using the three primary speeds of dance: *vilambit* (slow), *madhya* (medium), and *drut* (fast). it's an *abhinay* piece, that emphasizes expressions and emotions in dance.



Aditi then gave us a riveting performance of 3 vignettes around letter writing: the first, a love-lorn maiden writing to her lover and waiting for a reply. Aditi's languorous movements and expressions that moved from coy to longing, captured the dream like pace perfectly. The second depicted an efficient office girl, typing a letter, and attending to her work with crisp, economical gestures and footwork, that adroitly captured the idea of dynamic competence. The last, a harried, disorganized character, trying to do everything at once, typing, answering phones, chatting to colleagues, sharing lunch, all at breakneck speed, and accomplishing nothing. The performances were skilful and dazzling and had the audience laughing out loud at Aditi's playful, tongue in cheek yet always graceful depictions of the three wildly different characterizations!

CC: I think that was something we can all really reflect on: what rhythm do we live our life with, and how it affects us. Perhaps an insanely fast -paced rhythm of life can be a meaningless, superficial life devoid of purpose. And I think through your artistry and humour it was very revealing. You showed us that rhythm gives meaning, that we work with meaning through rhythm. But we need to realize what we're doing and really ask ourselves the philosophical question of why am I here, and how can I live life with meaning and joy? So, could you just share with us very simply, what are some meaningful values and virtues that you learned through dance?

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Aditi: The values of perseverance, absolute devotion and dedication which my mother and my Guruji's, Roshan Kumariji and Nandita Puri both taught me. The relentless love and affection for your art form. I often tell my students that your dance or music has to be like your lover or your best friend. It's a love relationship; the more time you spend with your art, the more it grows with you and you begin to love each other and you miss each other more and more. That's how you nurture this relationship and build the bond with yourself and your dance, because your dance is you, your art is you.

But by discipline, I mean the constant reaching out and seeking your art form, seeking you in that art form, and constantly sticking to it. From early childhood my mother would make sure that I practice every day for at least five minutes. And later, I would do my best performance and she would say, "*theek hai*" (that's okay). That was all that I got from her for the longest time.



So primarily, discipline, and respect for other people's journeys, because I know how tough it has been for me, and I respect what it takes to be where they are. There have been times when I wanted to detach myself from dance also, but no, that discipline, that integrity, and humility is the biggest one. Because you're never there, you have to always seek more and more knowledge. Like they say in Marathi, *vidya vinayana shobhite*: if you have *vinay*, if you have humility, that is when knowledge beautifies you. Truly, knowledge looks beautiful on you. So that "*theek hai*" by my mom was basically to teach me humility and keep me grounded. No matter what you do, there are people who have struggled more than you. There are people who have achieved more than you. So, respect, discipline, humility those are primarily the things that dance really taught me.



CC: At New Acropolis, we believe culture is a human legacy passed down through generations and across traditions, to recognize the beauty of our diverse human expressions and to discover that, though forms and expressions are different, it is always an expression of one life, our shared human spirit. Culture can allow us to see what unites us over what separates us, perhaps something we need more in our times today.

Aditi: Let me share my experience at a festival in Korea. The festival had six artists, and I was the finale. It started with monk dancers, so obviously, a slow meditative pace. There were modern, contemporary Korean dancers who were dancing to silence so there was no sound at all. And the first day of the rehearsal, I thought, when I present the *Lavani*, this is going to be very embarrassing, because this folkdance

requires that I keep going at full speed and full volume. And finally, they were all seated because everybody was done, and I was the last performer to go on. And to my surprise, as I started, I heard everybody clapping, whooping, stomping; how did this happen? I think that is where rhythm binds everybody. The minute there's a two and a four, we all feel it regardless of culture, race, colour, anything.

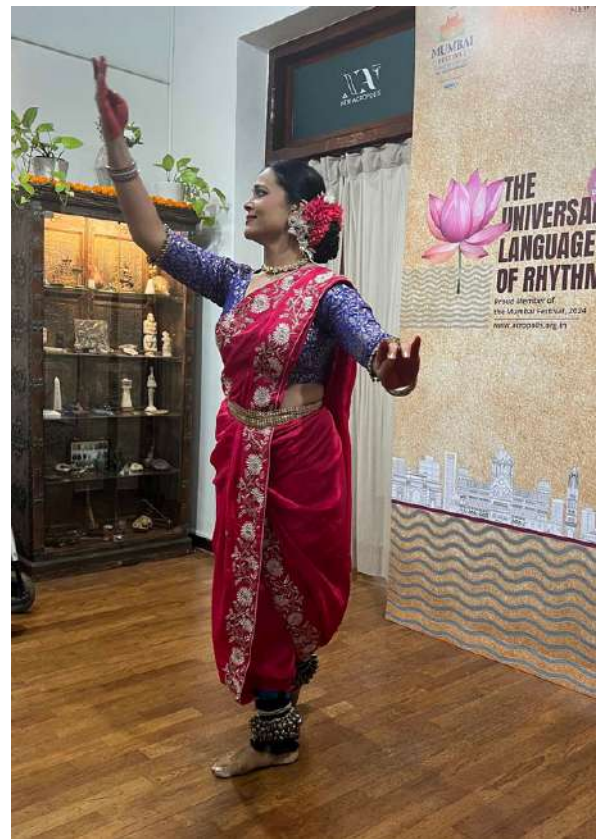
And this is truly unity in diversity; all these different forms of music and dance that I got to experience because I'm a Kathak dancer and then I could collaborate on different platforms. Whether it was an American banjo, an Iraqi dulcimer, a Venezuelan cuatro, or Spanish music, or jazz, the sky is the limit. All you need is to accept, explore, expand, and tolerate each other's values and each other's views. To illustrate this, I'm going to invite Flamenco dancer Bettina to join me on stage.

Here Aditi and Bettina together presented a breath-taking glimpse of part of a 90 minute collaboration of Flamenco and Kathak: Aditi's graceful mudras (hand gestures) and fleet yet perfectly precise footwork accentuated by her ghungaroor showcased Classical Kathak, yet were in perfect sync with Bettina's regal Flamenco, and her clicking castanets, majestic arm flourishes, and staccato footwork. Each dance form had its unique characteristics in arm gestures, foot flourishes, facial expression, costume and body language, but the common element that bound them and the audience together was the universal language of rhythm.

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Aditi: Now, this was, of course, exploring art forms going beyond boundaries, beyond international borders, but then there is so much here in India itself that one can explore. And that took me to *Lavani*. A Maharashtrian folkdance. I am a Maharashtrian, and just like all other people from different communities, I enjoy my folk music. And what better way to enjoy it than by performing it, studying it, and passionately bringing it to everybody.



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Lavani somehow is frowned upon even today. And that is sad. Because *Lavani* speaks so much about philosophy, about life. There are *Lavani*'s which talk about domestic violence, about social reformation. *Lavani* as an art form was also used during the freedom struggle to gather people to spread the message of freedom, of the movement of Swaraj. And that's why *Lavani* holds such a crucial place in our culture, in building the value systems of a community and truly empowering women because *Lavani* is the only folk-art form which is a solo female art form. Only women perform *Lavani*, depicting their lives, their problems, from pregnancies to female infanticide. I don't think any other art form is dedicated to only women. And look at when it started, back in the day, which is why I highly respect *Lavani* and it's truly taught me a lot.

I look at Kathak with a lot of reverence. So do I with *Lavani*. But *Lavani* helps me explore that side of my personality which otherwise is a little sobered down in Kathak dance. And I would like to again present a very, very small little piece from the entire *Lavani* repertoire. This is based on rhythm only. There's no song or spoken word.

What followed was a vigorous, spirited, effervescent performance with nimble footwork, and agile leaps across the stage, all executed with effortless vivaciousness.



Aditi: Just imagine letting your body go and dancing in sync with life. That's what dance does for me. It absolutely elevates me to another level. I bring my movements together with the reverence to the one, the maker, the one who made music for us, the one who made dance for us, the one who made this world for us, the ultimate one in that time cycle that we go back to and meet, the Ultimate Truth. It is absolute immersion, in rhythm and no inhibitions at all. When I teach my students, I say let go of inhibitions, leave them aside, face the world with whoever you are, with whatever best you can do, and the best part of you.

CC: At Acropolis, we too believe culture ennobles us. We understand culture as the cultivation of all that is best in every human being, as that which helps us to transform ourselves, to touch upon perhaps the noblest parts of us, finding the unity in the multiplicity of life. And today's event is a tribute to this idea, thank you so much Aditi and Bettina for being here today, sharing your insights and taking us through this wonderful investigation together. ☺☺