

Covering letter

Thanks to Lisa Ullmann Scholarship, I visited Chennai in India from Dec 16, 2009 to January 9, 2010. I could immerse in the music conference at Music Academy, 'Dance Matters' conference at Krishna Gana Sabha and revel in the glory of the more than 50 year old Ramayanam production at Kalakshetra. Added bonuses were two performances in Kerala. On 31st December, our company's performance was at the temple festival at Nurani village and on 3rd January, we performed at internationally revered temple at Guruvayoor for which we created a new piece.

While the trip was took me back to the place and air where I was born and brought up for 20 years. Although it was in some sense home coming, it rather unfolded into a brilliant reality check and inward journey exploring the self within a 'new' space.

I guess my overambitious schedule was checked by a foot injury which was painful and challenging yet the temptation to drink in more of the energy and experience was tempting and inspired me with renewed inner strength.

Now empowered with this experience, we are planning to revisit India in July - August with a performance tour including performances in Thrissur, Bangalore and Hyderabad which was forged during the December trip. Through a new education package, I am also hoping to disseminate (through workshops amongst colleagues in the Northwest) my learning during my visit.

Thank You Lisa Ullmann for this enriching and reviving experience.

Regards,
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UPASANA:  
An artist led experiment with tradition.  
Encouraging acceptance and respect through arts.  
Bringing Indian dance in UK through classes, workshops and performances.  
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[Lisa Ullmann Award Report](#)

[Background:](#)

When I was awarded the Lisa Ullmann Scholarship to attend and soak in the Chennai music and dance festival and attend Natya Kala Conference where doyens of dance met, I was elated with a hopeful sense of 'home coming.'



Little did I realise during my formative years of 1986 to 1993, how much this experience of the 'season', Chennai music and dance festival had been a part of me and moulded me. Like my parents, dance teachers and home, I had taken the *season* for granted and realised its significance only when after marriage I stepped out of India in 1993. I have since never really attended the season and all my updates are from my parents and more recently through kutcherbuzz and narthaki websites. The thought of now finally physically breathing the Chennai *season* was hence nostalgic at various levels. Ever since I last visited, I have surely grown older physically and mentally as an artist and as an individual. I have added roles as a wife and mother as an individual. As a dancer and teacher I now also engage the local British community with Indian classical dance and music through classes, workshops and performances at community and professional levels. Thanks to Lisa Ullmann scholarship, it is in this transformed avatar that I was revisiting the *season* in a journey which although began with a search to understand the space around rather emerged as an inward exploration.

[Preparation:](#)

Even before leaving for Chennai, a look (<http://www.artindia.net/madras09/index.html>) at what was lined up hinted not only how much I was spoiled for choice but rather how daunting the extent of my options was. From morning 8 to evening 10pm, amongst the possible 10 options, I found it difficult to choose within at least 2 or three brilliant choices. After an evening of research, and a frantic effort to choose only one option at a given point of time, I finally drew a simple, possible schedule which was effective, comprehensive and representative of my interests (page). I started my day in the morning at 7.30am with lec - dem (lecture demonstration) at Music Academy and when Conference at Krishna Gana Sabha started, hoped some miles across to Krishna Gana Sabha. After a late afternoon lunch and catch up with other aspects of Chennai (visiting temples, institutions, pavement stalls and later an



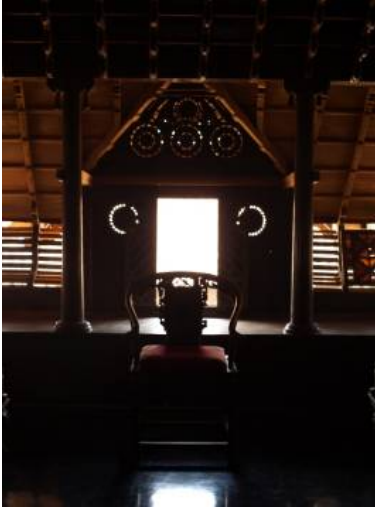


something!

Text Box: Figure 3: Shadow

afternoon rest as I had torn my ligament in the feet), I religiously attended the Kalakshetra Ramayan series in the evening from 5pm to 10 pm. An added bonus was my student's performance at a traditional village temple festival in Kerala and in the famous Guruvayoor temple also in Kerala. I was very keenly looking forward to attending the inauguration of the Swati Thirunal Music Festival within the Royal Padmanabhapuram palace in Trivandrum. The line up was exciting and demanding. Although I had an idea of what I was going for, I was open and tried to see everything all over with a fresh, objective perspective lest I missed out on

Contrasting and complementing Experience



The Music Academy lecture demonstrations in relation to music was revealing and humbling. I thoroughly enjoyed the fact that no one really knew me (personally coming from a dance background) and I enjoyed this incognito presence. Dominated by middle aged and elderly men in white and sprinkled with the humour of Valayapatti Subramaniam, the presentations and an elderly, intellectual, experienced panel of theoreticians and practitioners were mediated by the erudite, elegant magic of Dr. Pappu Venugopala Rao. Be it the humility with which T. V Gopalakrishnan after 65 years of experience and expertise rather humbly preferred to fill his one hour slot with 45 minutes of recordings from past stalwarts or Balasubramaniam's passion which overpowered his croaky sore throat, be it Gowri Ramnarayanan's zealous appreciation of music in Kalakshetra or Suguna Purushottaman's daring venture in challenging gendered stereotypes with relation to rhythm in her *dwitalam* (twin rhythmic cycle for single piece of music); the space was filled with ardent passion and years of focussed toil fragrant with humility and generosity. The intergenerational rapport between teacher and student was seen right from the 70 year old Tirchur Ramachandran who nostalgically with love, admiration and reverence spoke about his teacher G.N. Balasubramaniam to the present Suguna Purushottaman who proudly exhibited her three 25 year old student's focussed perseverance heralding the strength future. The austerity and sombre style at the Academy was a stark contrast to the glitter and glamour that greeted me amongst the dance conference at Krishna Gana Sabha.

Krishna Gana Sabha.



On 26 after attending Gowri Ramnarayan's reminiscence of how the golden jubilee master tunes at Kalakshetra were composed rather modestly in balconies and during morning walks by rather unassuming genius, as I entered Krishna Gana Sabha, I was bombarded by a swarm of rather young, predominantly women, mob animatedly buzzing in crisp silk and shimmering jewellery. It was a paradigm shift from music to dance! I conveniently slipped into the last door, torn between observing the audience and the stage. I admit the performance within the audience excelled the elegance and eloquent authority with which Hari Krishnan and Sri Vidya were reverently spoke about their guru. I sat there wondering if I ever belonged there. Did I actually want to? Can I ever be a part of it? Is this probably my same old space? Is it just that I have forgotten? Partial short term Amnesia? Has it actually changed? Or just that I have changed? Or possibly I have grown 'old'? It was a reality check and a moment of self query- the *moment* of my trip. Irrespective of the answer, what was significant was that these questions are asked. For this opportunity, I have none to bless but Lisa Ullmann Scholarship, as in the humdrum of daily life, I suppose I had moved far from

myself. This trip most significantly gave me the opportunity to understand myself and also the space around. It reintroduced me to Lakshmi Vishwanathan who amongst the young enthusiasm filled with speed and energy yet etched their mark with classical elegance demeanour. Quoting Ms. Vishwanathan, "I repeat my favourites unashamedly. The more I do, the more it evolves with me as a person." In this age of 'Whats new' culture this

repetition was refreshing indeed. A saga of passion, commitment, appreciation and reverence, Sujatha Mohapatra was truly poetry in motion. The reach of the conference was extensive and diverse including Dr. Sunil Kothari's treasured pictures, Priya Govind's insistence of fundamentals while exploring truth, beauty and spirituality in her dance, Dhananjayan sir's flamboyance with twelve male dancers while hailing the Rukmini Devi tradition, Padmini Chettur's negotiations of her own dance between classical and popular genre and Chitra Visweswaran's hypothesis of, "researching, recreating, reassessing in the process of reimagining the image." Amongst the cries mourning the loss of interest for classicism, was an unanimous call for collaboration. Sadanand Menon emphatically asked, "If arts are not going to represent a free state of mind in a democracy, what else will?" Leela Venkatraman on a different note wondered if in this jet age, would there ever be an Allaudin Khan who learnt a single Raag Yaman for 12 years before returning to learn more and churning out very many luminaries including Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan. The significance of pop culture vis-à-vis classical was best epitomised when 61 year old, no 1 Bollywood dance choreographer Saroj Khan who has worked in 200 films during the past 34 years and have won eight Film Fare Awards and three National Awards, filled the traditional, orthodox Krishna Gana Sabha proscenium with glitzy, scintillating Bollywood numbers. Probably the best note of the conference that possibly projected the hope of tomorrow was when 66 year old veteran, Padma Subrahmanyam certified how Saroj Khan's moves unconsciously was inspired by doctrines from the Natya Shastra (a 3000 year old bible of theatre.)

Text Box: Figure 6: Ceiling, Padmanabhapuram Palace.



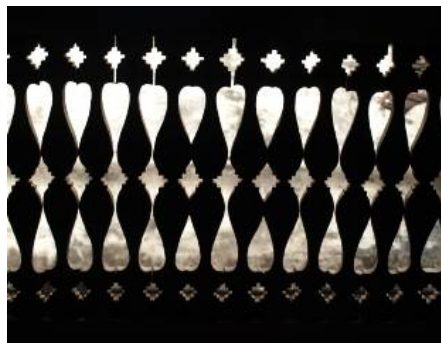


Kalakshetra, interestingly enough was within this space and time of December season and yet out of it. Its rich stand alone, holistic, 50 year old presentations of Ramayanam split into 6 productions and choreographed over fourteen years (1955 – 1970); was a timeless testimony to Kalakshetra as an unique institution par excellence. The uniqueness was at different levels – the perfection of symmetry, the soulful music which was a silent yet ubiquitous performance by itself, the elegant stage setting, an impressive lighting which was most effective with its quietness, grand and ageless ‘period’ costumes and the alacrity with which the evening unfolded day after day for one packed week around a packed state of the art auditorium. Interestingly the uniqueness extended to the audience as well which was extremely interesting. Camaraderie as expected not only was evident amongst the dancers, orchestra and the supporting staff which more was a single family but more importantly between the audience and this family which unfortunately is a rare



phenomenon. Although there were some few common faces seen elsewhere in the city, this audience and discipline was of a different genre. It was amazing how there was not a single mobile ring which constantly punctuated the sessions at Music Academy and more so at Krishna Gana Sabha. The late comers even if any seem to be unobstructive to the audience. No chit chatting or munching. Even the children seemed to know they were in a *Koothambalam*, temple of arts, as the auditorium is named. From the days when Kalakshetra was criticised for sanitising Bharatanatyam and removing Sringara (love/ romance) today the circle seems to have completed when Brigha Bressell, student of Kalandhi Narayanan (the last name in Abinaya) initiates students in Kalakshetra to the various shades of Sringara. Interestingly today’s Kalakshetra is a beacon of hope shrouding the best of modernity with the veil of tradition rather than otherwise!

Performances



My company’s performance at Kerala’s Nurani Shastha Preethi was a sublime, experience.

http://www.bioscoopfilms.net/nurani_sasthapreethi_ayyapan_pattu_part_1/W-3fZfVsS34.html

It was magical to be a part of this age old temple tradition, to immerse in its intense rural energy, just exist within the swarming masses scurrying for the midday community meal and yet be distinguished and appreciated as an artist. The dominating question in everyone’s mind was, ”Who is this company all the way from UK when we have so many local stalwarts?” Hence we not only earned appreciation and admiration from this difficult audience but rather turned out to be a model for them to follow. This success I owe to my teacher’s and family training to implicitly adhere to age-old values of aesthetics, discipline, commitment and passion. This was followed by another prestigious performance at internationally respected Guruvayoor Temple. Although both were temple performances, it was interesting to note the differences. Nurani performance was studded with zeal and camaraderie in a close knit village temple festival with the dance performed on a make shift stage (tables) and a more interesting dressing room (the vegetable and grocery store room to support 5 days of community meals for thousands) for an audience who transcended from the suspicious to more of a family who seemed to be proud of us. On the other hand at Guruvayoor the stage and all the arrangements leading to it were very professional. The teeming international audience was more a drop in variety slurping generous portion of our performance as part of their overall feast of devotion and spirituality. It was interesting how the same set of dances reflected these differences in various colours, within audience and our own experience.

Beyond:

After this once in a lifetime enriching experience to perform and explore spaces and people within their own contexts of temple festivals, culture and tradition, we moved on to reflect by the Vivekananda Rock and revel in the ‘modest grandeur’ of Trivandrum’s Padmanabhapuram Palace which is an embodiment of a royal legacy highlighting tradition and grace juxtaposed with a present day mundane humdrum. As I enjoyed Sanjay Subrahmanian’s energetic, flamboyant music concert at *Kuthiramalikai* (palace) for a, commonly focussed yet eclectic mix of local and international audience interspersed with the elite and niche, I could not but envisage how different this was from Sanjay’s own austere rendition at Music Academy.



I look back on this whirlwind of a trip which amongst many things was constantly flavoured with excruciating pain from a torn ligament in my left foot. It reassuringly awakened the physical and mental tenacity within me as a performer which I thought had rusted within my



roles as a teacher, community worker, mother and a wife. Funnily enough a 70 year old veteran, a stranger, offered his walking stick to me at Music Academy and a week later at Krishna Gana Sabha observed heartily that I looked much better! Besides the pain with calculated

steps and careful balancing. I yet did snatch a dip in the beach, gazed at the rapturous Adirapally waterfall, and offered a bow to the majestic gopuram (temple tower) of Kapaleeshwarar temple that stands witness to changing times for the past 1400 years. I also managed to reverently prostrate before my gurus, 75 year old Lakshman Sir and 80 year old Kalanidhi Narayanan, exchange familiar loving hellos with all orchestra members, manage a reassuring, all explaining smile from my friend, Janaki (Editor of Sruti magazine), keep abreast with the latest trends in costumes and jewellery during my runs to Shanti Tailors and catch up with Ramli Ibrahim (Director, Sutra Dance Company at Malaysia) on the days we practised together in 1980s. Interestingly, I am sure the younger crop of dancers must have even wondered who is this that seems to know all veterans and yet seems to have emerged from nowhere. I remember thinking similarly about others rather naively as a child. With the passage of time written on me, I revisited the persona and art of those veterans amongst whom I grew. Suddenly my own transition over the past 15 years revealed a new landscape of genius, and perspective and how timeless and farsighted these veterans were who yet successfully negotiate their experience and art amongst youthful energy and glamour.

Even as I flew back from the warm portals of Chennai to be greeted by snow in Manchester, I tried encapsulating my trip - tiring, hectic, inspiring, interesting, revealing, enriching, fun, updating, educational and possibly many more myriad adjectives. However what was most important was that it allowed me to explore my inner self as an individual and as an artiste within a more updated and realistic framework of space, time and society. Interestingly after returning, life seems to speed past rather dramatically difficult I reckon, with repeated bouts of troubled feet, some essay submissions for my MA at University, a carjacking, two sold out shows at The Lowry and most importantly my father's sudden illness and narrow escape. Beyond all this I must admit this trip has left me with realistic, pragmatic, renewed confidence, strength and energy. **Thank You Lisa Ullmann.**



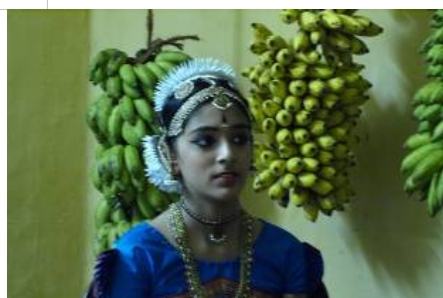
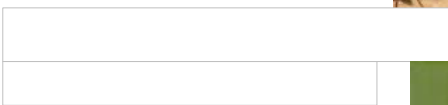
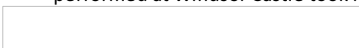
*The music in my heart I bore,
long after it was heard no more.*

Note:

1. Although the report might be full of names and technical terms, I rather left it that was so that it remains an outpour from the heart.
2. A treasure of details, reviews and photographs of the Natya Kala conference is available at <http://www.natyakalaconference.com/reviews.asp>

I must add that while watching the videos of the session I attended, I could not but note the difference in experience (lack of energy of the space and distraction from cell phone rings!)

3. A neat account of Kalakshetra Ramayan is available at <http://www.columbuscarnaticmusic.org/pdf/Rukmini-Devi-Ramayana.pdf>
4. It was also nice to see some known faces from UK and more interestingly to see them all over anew in a new setting. I even managed to see London based Anusha Subramanyam(and fellow Lisa Ullmann Scholarship winner) perform. Her new piece on creation which she performed at Windsor Castle took new shades as she repeated the same in Chennai.



Nurani



Guruvayoor





Lisa Ullmann Schedule

Date	Time	Artist	Venue	Notes
18	9.15 4.15 7.00	N Ramani, Hariprasad Vishaka Hari	Music Academy Music Academy Music Academy	
19	3.45 – 4.30	Mahati Malavika	Brahma Gana Krishna Gana	Pettachi Sivagami Auditorium Vocal
20	8.00 1.0 – 2.15 2.0 6.30	Ritha Rajan T.M.Krishna Sumithra Nitin Sita Swayamvaram	Academy Academy Brahma Gana Kalakshetra	Versions of Thyagaraja Context of Dikshitar
21	8am 6.30	Vedavalli TVG Rama Vana Gamanam	Academy Kalakshetra	Ragas with dual names in post trinity Carnatic and Hindustani Aesthetics and Gamaka
22	8.00 2.00 6.30	Kanyakumari Kausalya .R Anusha Paduka Pattabhishekam	Academy Academy Narada Gana Sabha Kalakshetra	GNB compositions Panccamarabu
23	8.00 7.30	Balasubramanian Suguna Purushotaman Shabari Moksham	Academy Academy Kalakshetra	Tunes of Nandanar Charitram Teaching and practise of Dwitilam
24	8.00 6.30	Somanathan Valayapatti Choodamani Pradhan	Academy Academy Kalakshetra	Properties of skin covered inst. Layam Aalayam
25	8.00 6.30	Lalgudi Seetha Rajan Mahapattabhishekam	Academy Academy Kalakshetra	My association with GNB Manji and allied ragas Karthik Fine Arts
26	8.00 9.30 – 10.30 10.45 – 11.45 11.45 – 13.00 4.30 – 6.30	Gowri Jayant Kasturi Sunil Kothari Hari, SriVidya, Priya TV Sankaranarayan	Academy KGS	Kalakshetra dance music Key Note Address Where do we go from here? Changing Kinetics
27	9.15 - 10.05 1.10 - 11.00 11.10 - 12.00 12.10 - 13.00 6.30	Nandini Ramani V.P.Dhananjayan Anuradha Ashish Mohan Malavika Nithyashree	KGS Mylapore Fine Arts	Balasaraswati Legacy The Male Dancer – Kalakshetra Legacy Vempatti Chinna Satyam Legacy Mohan Khokar Legacy
28	9.15 – 10.05 10.10- 11.00 11.10 - 12.00 12.10 – 13.00 4.30pm	Sujatha Mohapatra Lakshmi Vish Panel Anita Ratnam Vijay Shiva	KGS BVB	Wither Sringara Essence of Abhinaya Media and Dance Excerpts from New York Karthik Fine Arts
29	8.00 9.15 - 10.05 1.10 - 11.00 11.10 - 12.00 12.10 - 13.00 6.00	Hema Suddha Chitra Vish Anita Ratnam Radhika Surjit Panel Madhavi Mudgal	Academy Academy KGS Brahma Gana	Sama Veda Sufiana Kala Reimagining the Image Collaborations Reality Shows and Dance Dancing Difference
30	8.00 9.15 - 10.05 1.10 - 11.00 11.10 - 12.00 12.10 - 13.00	Charumathi Kumudhini Lakhia Ramli and Geetha Panel Saroj Khan	Academy KGS	4 women legends Choreography Stretch Marks Young Gurus gen – Next Dance in Film
30	Train evening	To Pallakad		
31	Nurani	Performance		
1	Nurani	Shashtha Preethi		
2	Nurani	Ramanathapuram / Manapalli Kaavu Temple etc		
3	Guruvayoor	Performance		
4	Adirapally	And train to Nagercoil		
5	Kanyakumari	Day trip		
6	Trivandrum	Day trip/ concert		
7	NGL -Chennai	Morning train		
8	Chennai	Pack and wind up		
9	Airport	Chennai - Manchester		



Text Box: Figure 14: Rapturous, Adirapally

