

# Will she dance or not?

HAFIZUR RAHMAN hopes to see a dance revival

A.A. The Naheed 8.6.03

**W**e the people of Pakistan, are double-minded about many things in life because of inherent contradictions induced by faith on the one hand and the desire to be modern on the other. For instance, we have double standards where the arts are concerned. Should we appear to enjoy them when we come in contact with them in public, or should we frown at them to show our puritanical attitude? We are undecided.

This indecision is nowhere more evident than in the case of dance, whether it is purely classical or the type that simply panders to the senses and is seen mostly in vulgar Pakistani films. The fad remains that most of us will walk miles to see a dance performance, but if our daughter wants to learn the art we would rather see her dead than let her indulge her fancy.

This has led to two mutually exclusive facts. One, if there is a public performance by Naheed Siddiqui of Tehreema Mitha or any of the very small number of female dancers in Pakistan, there is such a rush for passes, and even priced tickets, that numerous fans go back disappointed. Two, the situation does not allow that very small number of dancers to increase because of inhibitions all around. Owing to these two facts, even a public dance performance is controlled in such a way that the common man cannot get entry into the premises.

This is not the place to trace the history of dance in Pakistan, but something must be said as background. At partition, we had only one woman who danced the classical variety publicly. This was Madame Auzurie, a South Indian who was here because she was married to a Rawalpindi man. Gradually, more were trained especially by the Bengali (Thanshavam, his wife Tara and their troupe in Karachi). The enchanting troupe of Bulbul Chaudhry, a Muslim from East Pakistan, did much to popularise the art and spread appreciation for it in West Pakistan.

Soon afterwards PIA set up its dance group of highly accomplished performers in Karachi, and the culmination came when the Punjab Council of the Arts was created in



1973 during the PPP government of ZAB and it managed to collect a group of fine amateur dancers (the inspiration came from the then Chief Minister Haneef Ramay) and organised a troupe of its own which gave performances all over the province, consisting mostly of Kathak solos and ballets with a story to tell. These became extremely popular.

I use the word culmination with a purpose, because when the Bhutto regime was toppled by Gen. Zia, dance in Pakistan came to an end.

*The only thing that could be shown was folk dances by male performers.* I was Secretary Culture in Punjab when the Punjab Arts Council's dance group was born, and I was Secretary Culture again, for the second time, when it was disbanded and the girl and boys were sent home.

Then there was a revival. Since the ultra-orthodox types, who believed that even laughing loudly was an unIslamic act, and that instead of enjoying even harmless pursuits Muslims should be reading religious literature, had beaten a retreat, organisers of classical dance

functions are coming to the fore. The two talented ladies, Naheed Siddiqui and Tehreema Mitha, have been giving many performances in this part of the country, though they still take care to ensure that entry to their shows is not unrestricted. But now that the ultra-orthodox types are back, and this time in full parliamentary force, one can only hazard a guess as to what will happen to dance.

In the meantime, over the last decade or so, two other highly talented dancers have also earned fame. Based in Karachi, Nighat Chaudhry and Sheema Kirmani have made a place for themselves in the domain of Kathak. Their up-country tours too have been very successful and have done much to create a love of the art in the minds of girls from good families. In fact, it can be stated that these ladies have managed to remove much of the inhibitions relating dance from the enlightened public's mind.

The last of Naheed Siddiqui's shows was arranged by the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (which incidentally has chalked out a programme of active dance promotion) over a year ago, where the hall was jampacked by keen admirers of the art who bought tickets to contribute to assistance for Afghan children. That of Tehreema was sponsored by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, a prominent NGO of Islamabad, to raise funds for a peace movement. It was dedicated to her father, the late General Osman Mitha who was quoted as having once said that "No one wants peace as much as a soldier who has seen war." Tehreema's mother, Indu Mitha was there, but only as a proud teacher and parent.

I am sure enthusiasts in Lahore and Karachi must also be making plans to have public dance performances, though there is nothing in the newspapers to suggest that such

plans are under deliberation. By the way when Kishwar Naheed, perhaps the most active, outgoing and innovative DG the PNCA has ever had, was in that chair some three years ago, she held a week-long festival of dance in Karachi which was a huge success.

Here I must join in the general mourning at the death of Faqir Husamn Saga. For thirty years the only male to hit the footlights, this veterinary doctor was a novelty because of his academic qualification. But he loved dancing which he learnt by sifting at the feet of Madame Auzurie, and acquired fame in Pakistan as well as in the countries where he went with cultural troupes. Now thankfully, Fasihur Rahman of Karachi is taking his place, as it were, and has shown himself to be highly accomplished.

Notaries of dance as a classical art form in Pakistan will always remain beholden to Maharaj Kathak, who, on migration from India, made Lahore his home. There is no dancer in this country, male or female, who has not been directly or indirectly taught by him or influenced by him. It is unbelievable but I have seen him as nimble on his feet at the age of eighty as a child. A truly great man and a loving teacher, he died some five years ago.

In an interview recently Naheed Siddiqui thanked the PNCA for putting dance on a dignified pedestal and promoting performers whose concerns extend beyond commercialisation. On her part she promised to somehow introduce dance in the education system in a bid to prevent this art from dying in Pakistan. That will not be easy.

Apart from the grace that she imparts to Kathak, Tehreema Mitha is also an expert in Bharatnatyam, a rather complicated and difficult dance style which she learned from her mother. Tehreema is now based in Washington where her Scandinavian husband works in an international agency. She has formed a Tehreema Mitha Dance Company there to reconnect (as she puts it) young Asians to their cultural heritage.

These two young ladies, Naheed and Tehreema are a national asset. It would be a pity if their undoubted talent, which is of world standard, were to be allowed to get lost in the welter of retrogressive ideas and antediluvian tendencies which assert themselves in Pakistan from time to time. ●