

## FESTIVALS OF INDIA ABROAD IN SOUTH EAST ASIA



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1. I vividly remember the day in September 2013, when the new Director of Kalakshetra Foundation met me in Shastri Bhavan. I had read about the famous Bharata Natyam Dance School, but it was my first meeting with its top management. She mentioned the strengths of the Kalakshetra Foundation and we discussed the possibility of Kalakshetra's participation in the Festivals of India abroad. I promised her that I would take forward the collaboration initiative in the coming months.

2. My first opportunity to work with Kalakshetra Foundation came in January - February 2014. Ministry of Culture had decided to conduct Festivals of India abroad in the South East Asian countries of Lao People Democratic Republic and Cambodia. The common culture binding India with South East Asian countries was Buddhism and the great epic of Ramayana. We requested Director Central Institute of Himalayan Studies to formulate the Buddhist Festival at That Luang Stupa in Vientienne. The Kalakshetra Foundation was requested to present their repertoire of Ramayana series to the audience in Vientienne, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. It was the first foray of Ministry of Culture into South East Asia and we were worked on the duration and themes to be presented.

3. A few days later, the Kalakshetra Foundation informed me that the top 3 selections identified for presenting to the audience in Lao PDR and Cambodia for the 9 shows were "Jatayu Moksham", "Chudamani Pradanam" and "Maha Pattabhishekam". A meeting was convened in Chennai at the Kalakshetra Foundation headquarters to firm up the details. In my first visit to Institution, I was greatly impressed. I found the Kalakshetra Foundation, a unique Institution - it represented a premier dance school par excellence. The ambience is so intensely focused for learning classical Bharata Natyam, the entire Institution resonates with a seriousness of purpose. The work on the Ramayana in the Kalakshetra Foundation dated back to the early 1960's, the repertoire was developed by Rukmani Devi Arundel. The repertoire was so comprehensive that no changes were made even 40 years later. For decades the Post Graduate Students of Kalakshetra Foundation learnt and had perfected the presentations on the Ramayana.

4. The Kalakshetra Foundation arranged a full dress rehearsal of the “Jatayu Moksham” and it was quite spell binding. We finalized the composition of the Kalakshetra delegation, the dance dramas to be presented, the dates of travel and the venues for the performance – the National Cultural Hall in Vientienne, the Sofitel Hotel Auditorium in Siem Reap and Chaktmouk Theater in Phnom Penh. In all 9 shows were to be presented. In Vientienne, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister along with the Minister for Culture, Tourism and Information were to be the Chief Guests at the Inaugural Function. At Phnom Penh the Mission had invited the Deputy Prime Minister to the Inaugural Function at the Chaktmouk Theater.

5. Lao PDR is the land of Buddhists. There were stupas and monks at many places. The Buddhist Festival was received with huge reverence in the That Luang Stupa premises. The monks conducted the Lama Chanting, Lama Dances, the Sand Mandala work commenced. The exhibition by the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara called “Dhamma Darshana” received huge response.

6. The Senior Government functionaries and the Ministers along with many monks attended the performances of Kalakshetra Foundation at the National Cultural Hall, Vientienne. In their speeches the leaders of Lao PDR repeatedly emphasized the cultural threads between India and Lao PDR as Buddhism and the great epic Ramayana. Many of them knew and understood the intricacies of the Ramayana dance depictions. The Deputy Prime Minister of Lao PDR mentioned how keen he was to see the golden deer chased by Lord Rama and the attempted rescue of Sita by Jatayu in his opening address.

7. The Festival of India in Lao PDR was almost a Text Book Performance. The Festival of Dance, the Buddhist Festival, the Food Festival, the Yoga Festival and the Mehendi artists did very well and were warmly applauded. The South Zone Cultural Centre coordinated the event. It was India’s first major cultural foray into Lao PDR in several years. The International Cultural Relations division received a congratulatory e-mail from Secretary Culture after the events.

8. We reached Phnom Penh on February 13, 2014. The mighty Mekong passes through the entire region and integrates the countries of the region in many ways. Secretary Culture and I called on the Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia and presented the schedule of events of the Festival of India in Cambodia. He was very excited by the fact the Ramayana was being presented by Kalakshetra Foundation. He advised us to visit Angkor Wat and see the Great Ramayana panel depicting the war between the Vanaras and Asuras. When I saw the Great Ramayana panel in Angkor Wat the next day, it was truly imposing, depicting in great detail the Ramayana battles.

9. The audience at Siem Reap was extremely knowledgeable. The Cambodia people were very familiar with the Great epic and applauded the nuances of the Bharata Natyam performance by the students of Kalakshetra Foundation. While I did not attend the performances at the Chaktmouk Theater, the performance “Maha Pattabhiskam” was cited as the performance of the year in Cambodia.

10. The success of the performances in Lao PDR and Cambodia emboldened us in the Ministry of Culture to work very closely with Kalakshetra Foundation for the Festivals of India abroad events in China, Japan and Malaysia. Presenting students in international fora was huge responsibility that we were taking for ensuring excellence and quality of events. Everywhere the response was overwhelmingly positive. The Kalakshetra Foundation’s performances were also presented in the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the SAARC Culture Ministers held in New Delhi and applauded by the Culture Ministers of SAARC Countries.

11. Director Kalakshetra was keen on presenting all 6 Ramayana episodes to the audience in New Delhi. These performances titled “Ramayana” by Kalakshetra were performed to full houses in November 2014. Each episode was nearly 2 hours and yet the enthralled audience lapped each moment. The Ramayana is so deeply ingrained into the Indian psyche that irrespective of age and time, the story always resonated.

12. The Ministry of Culture worked closely with Director Kalakshetra to streamline the organizational aspects of the Festivals of India. The selection of dance productions circulars were formulated following lengthy consultations resulting in ample opportunities to several aspiring artists seeking to perform in offshore lands.

13. The success of the Festivals of India in many South East Asian Countries was dependent on the hard work and commitment of the students of Kalakshetra Foundation. That such young artists could excel in the presence of a very distinguished audience indicated their confidence levels and professionalism of the great Institution that Kalakshetra Foundation is. Truly it represents the great legacy of Indian culture and a vital role in propagating and sustaining it over several decades in future.

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***\*Author is a senior civil servant, an IAS officer of 1989 batch, served as Joint Secretary International Cultural Relations in the Ministry of Culture from August 2013 to December 2014.***

***The views expressed in the Article are his personal.***