

## **Producing More Than We Consume**

### *Lessons in the "Chinmaya Mission Pledge" from the Bharat Sambhavam project*

**By Aniket Sidhaye**

What happens when the Mission takes on big challenges? Are the inspiring words heard in Mission centers around the world translatable into inspired action? In short, yes. Those who attended the Chinmaya Mission Washington Regional Center (CMWRC) sponsored Bharat Sambhavam performance on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at the Kennedy Center will tell you that the vision of India's spiritual and cultural greatness presented in the form of a Kuchipudi dance ballet was one that left the audience spellbound. The story, the music and the dance all blended so well together for a feast for the soul and senses. And the color! Those of Indian origin left feeling proud of their heritage. The success of the program shows how Mission members can take the message of Vedanta into the "real" world, answer challenges and raise dreams into reality. How this was accomplished is a lesson to us all and bears recounting.



One of our members, Smt. Mrinalini Sadananda has established a dance academy in Northern Virginia where students learn the art of Kuchipudi. Years of training and molding students into artists and several increasingly successful dance ballets allowed her to dream of performing at the prestigious Kennedy Center. The Chinmaya Mission decided to sponsor this program nearly two years ago. As you might imagine there is an application process requiring presentation of credentials and even this does not guarantee prompt evaluation. Understandably, a center where western performing arts are on display might have difficulty assessing the credibility of a group based in the United States and professing expertise in the classical Indian arts. The application languished and only the efforts of Mr. Satyanarayana Bakshi accelerated the process. He persuaded the management to review tapes of past performances and assess Kalamandapam's credentials. Earnest belief and a mental preparedness to accept "no," **but only after exhausting all avenues** helped Mr. Bakshi get the Eisenhower Theater (not typically released for non-commercial, non-serial shows) for us. It is a lesson for anyone; the sensitivity that causes a fear of failure must be shed to achieve projects seemingly outside our reach.

Suddenly, in late November the reality of April 17<sup>th</sup> was on us. From the artist's perspective, the commitment to produce a grand spectacle involved many factors: Choreographing a complex yet graceful dance; getting dancers of all ages to hone their skills; writing a music score which balanced lyricism and rhythm; imagining and creating



backdrops, costumes and props to enhance the sensory spectacle. The Mission had pledged sponsorship and now it was time to deliver. Considerable financial risk given an up front commitment of \$40,000 to the Kennedy center and the potential for significant financial gain needed a coordinated effort.

The coordinating committee met every Sunday between mid-January to April 11. Under the leadership of Prakash Soman, K. Sadananda and Raju Chidambaram, committees were formed to achieve the following tasks: publicity, sponsorship/donations, ticket sales, and creative assistance.

The biggest challenge was ensuring financial success. Mr. Soman prepared a financial plan that helped us realize how a sold out performance would only help cover the costs of the performance; to realize a financial benefit for the Mission sponsorships were critical. After much collective thought and after many revisions, a booklet was prepared for sponsors to review. With booklet in hand, volunteers set to the task of soliciting individuals and corporations for support ranging \$500 to \$5000. This involved numerous phone calls, face-to-face meetings and maybe even some arm-twisting. For Praduman Jain this was a personal challenge; he put to use his contacts in Bank of America and other places for the good purpose of raising substantial sponsorship support for the event. Thanks to the collective efforts of these volunteers the Mission has realized significant monetary benefit. The good name of the Mission and positive image established by our community, seeds planted long ago, allowed these hard working volunteers to reap a plentiful harvest.

Critical to the overall success was making sure the show was sold out. A major task for the committee was coming up with a pricing chart for the show and we had to overcome our preconceptions of what people would be willing to pay. Along the way, we learned that Kalamandapam's track record, Mrs. Sadananda's reputation and just the name Kennedy Center excited people enough to pay a premium price for tickets. Our publicity effort involved designing posters for public distribution, presentations at weekend Mission meetings, the publication of a beautiful essay by Rachna Venugopal about Kalamandapam in *India Post*, and placing advertisements during Indian TV programming.

Those who attended will tell you that majestic backdrops and beautiful props enhanced the sensory spectacle. For the backdrops Shireen and Gangajee Balkissoon took on the responsibility of developing these works of art. Consider the task of conceptualizing, designing and painting 5 canvases measuring in sum total 4000 square feet!!! About 1 month before the performance, a significant bottleneck was identified: priming the canvases had to be done before the actual painting and this task required a combination of time, space and hands that the Balkissoon family simply did not have. So after 4 hours of dance practice one afternoon, many of the Kalamandapam dance students spent 2-3 hours

priming these massive canvases. With this completed, Shireenji directed many other volunteers to help complete the task – long strokes of blue, little dabbles of pink, glue some sparkles here, staple some jute there, measure this canvas, cut that one. This is only one example of how individuals either themselves or through their contacts helped Kalamandapam obtain the best props and costumes for the performers.



While the end product was a 145 minute display of color, music, rhythm and form that dazzled all those watching, this essay was meant to give you only a glimpse of the preparation and organization that went into the production. The entire effort is a wonderful example of how unfettered imagination coupled with purposeful effort enables groups and individuals to better themselves.

Some final thoughts on what made this such a greatly satisfying experience to all volunteers, directors and dancers alike. Certainly a post-session review will be done and we will identify areas where our efforts could have been more intense or better timed, so that the next major project we undertake can be even more successful. For now we will focus on the success factors. Fundamental to meeting this challenge was the attitude embodied at the outset during one of our meetings: Every time we have set goals in the past we have met them. There is, therefore, every confidence that if we set clear goals, develop a good plan, and put our best foot forward we will exceed expectations this time as well. As a member of the “younger generation,” I was amazed to see the capacity for work and clearness of vision. The meetings were extremely professional and focused. This helped foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. In turn, this allowed individuals to act most effectively based on their own strengths and weaknesses. For those of us less experienced, we learned what those strengths and weaknesses were. Now that the project has ended, one is struck with how rare it is to be involved in something fundamentally constructive. How unwittingly lucky are the students of Kalamandapam who have been involved in and instrumental to this constructive effort over the last many years!! It is our sincere hope that all Mission members (indeed, every soul on this planet) can experience this at some time or another.

