



**B**itter memories of past racist policies and acts have marred Australia's history. The hunting down and gunning of Aborigines, the incident of the 'Stolen Generations', the attacks on new arrivals of non-Anglo Celtic immigrants and of Chinese immigrants in particular, the official adoption of a 'White Australia policy' etc. Negative memories such as these resonate even in



Shyamon Jayasinghe

present times casting suspicion among the dominant migrant population that lives and thrives in this great continent today. It is hard for Australia to shake off its past. Nevertheless, it is fact that the Australia of today represents a different story.

For one thing, we are all living in changed times. This is the modern and post-modern era of globally dominant human rights consciousness. The ruling adults of today are products of a schooling system that has turned its back on the outdated ideology of racism. Secondly, there is a growing realization among political leaders that immigration is vital for this country's survival. In seeking to achieve immigration targets the resort to Asian and African sources have become inevitable for the simple reason that sources in the West have dried up. Thirdly, the intake of hordes of Asian-African migrants have transformed the electorate over here so much so that the ruling class have had to adopt and defend measures that are lethal to a racist ideology. Fourthly, education in Australia has turned out to be a big export industry with many tertiary institutions over here dependent for their economic survival on students from Asia.

One thing that stands out throughout this transformation of Australia is that Australians are characteristically very practical people willing to shed what does not work anymore and likewise willing to cling to anything that brings results. Furthermore, the sense of egalitarianism that ironically grew even in the days of its racism has spread its coverage to welcome the huge diversity that now is.

Among pockets racism still clings. However, there is little evidence to assert that the racism that persists today is institutional or systemic. Rather, it is sporadic, random and isolated.

What, then, does one make of the recent attacks on Indian students?

What of the Cronulla riots two years ago? In just one year over 1,500 Indian students have been bashed in various incidents across Australia. We saw huge protests among the Indian Diaspora here. The collective angst naturally spread to the subcontinent and this became an international issue. The Indian press went to town in a wide-spread hysterical outburst. Effigies of Kevin Rudd were burnt in the Indian capi-

itals. The Australian government, both at federal and state levels, were quick to go across to India and give an assurance to Delhi. Kevin Rudd urged that "Australia is not racist at all. Australia is a country of great diversity, harmony and tolerance." John Brumby did the same.

The fact is that the criminal incidents that took place were not entirely racist inspired. Such acts are too complex to be dubbed with an indiscriminating tar brush. Investigations have in fact revealed a dominant criminal element in the assaults. Thugs and thieves found a soft target in Indian students who by nature are a

**It does not seem fitting that peoples of Asian-African countries have become over-reactive about isolated incidents that smell of racism.**

soft kind of population who work hard for good money in order to upkeep themselves here and to send money across to their families at home. Indians students are seen as grabbing at every opportunity that comes their way in order to build an income. They engage in part time night shift work at Seven Eleven stores, petrol sheds etc and this nature of work, too, makes these students an easy prey for thugs and thieves.

The racially unrelated criminal element has now been established by the evidence of video footage that is in the custody of the police. The video footage of the infamous pack attack on Sorabh Sharma on the Werribee train shows up thugs as not only Anglos but those belonging to other ethnicities. Macquarie University student Mukul

Khanna stated, "A lot of my Pakistani friends have left the place after being brutally attacked and robbed... Interestingly the attackers are mostly not locals and are themselves people of foreign origin." Another student, Tanveer, who had been bashed told the Beyond India Monthly, "When I turned on Anderson Road I saw four black men...one of them came running behind us and hit me with a stick. Then they started hitting my wife... I want action against those African guys". Besides, many of the attacks have been on Indian students operating taxis. This indicates that the objective had been to grab money, they are also generally soft spoken and therefore seen as soft targets for attack by thugs and criminals.

Take the case of the Cronulla riots in Sydney two years ago. In these incidents Lebanese gangs are reported to have been causing a string of provocative actions that preceded the attacks. The police had done little to stem the provocations and clamp down the arm of law. This led some booze-filled lads to gang up against the Lebanese gangs. Cronulla was drummed up as being pure racist but that was not so. One has therefore, to be careful about making racism charges in contemporary Australia. At both state and federal levels a solid regime of anti-racial legislation pervades. Australia today has not seen the kind of race riots that took place in France and other European countries. Australia of today is plainly a tolerant country. Which other country liberally doles out grants to foster the diverse ethnicities here under a policy of multiculturalism? Which other country in the affluent West provides funds out of taxpayer money to keep ethnic community radios alive and afloat? France has banned Arabic women from sporting



the face-veil; Australia has not. The abysmal electoral failure of Pauline Hanson is proof that any kind of right wing racist politics will not thrive in Australia as we have seen happening in countries like Germany.

Isolate racist incidents at workplaces will continue here and there. This is inevitable in a country that is still not used to seeing 'strange people' from foreign lands. There is a dimension of xenophobia or fear of foreigners in this development. It would take more time to heal such cleavages in a country that is getting more and more diverse. At the beginning, Anglo-Celts used to fear Italians and Greeks whom they nicknamed 'wogs'. As time went on these groups of 'foreigners' came to be accepted into the mainstream. Likewise, it will take some time for the newer waves of Asians and the still newer Africans to become fully accepted. All this is due to the xenophobic element in racism and certainly not due to any widespread acceptance of the ideology of racism that carries the notion of racial superiority.

It does not seem fitting that peoples of Asian-African countries have become over-reactive about isolated incidents that smell of racism. These countries are plainly guilty of ugly racism in their own entrenched caste and tribal systems flagged as they are by sordid human rights violations.

## Vishver Narthana Rekha 2009

Response to Vanaja Srinivasan

I would first like to sincerely thank everyone who witnessed our Vishver Narthana Rekha concert on the 6th of September. I have been blown away by the many compliments my dance academy received upon the presentation of the concert. However, in the recent edition of the Pahana and Sannasa newspapers, I was saddened to see an article regarding my dance items which incorporated Bharathanatyam, and its supposed lack of technique. Consequently, I am making a public response to Vanaja Srinivasan's criticism, as I feel I have a responsibility towards my dance academy and my students.

I am fully aware, and respect the fact, that Bharathanatyam is a very rich Indian dance form that has its roots deep in Indian history. Few Sri Lankans learn this intricate dance style from India, and in turn they teach Sri Lankan students the art of Bharathanatyam. Under Ms. Rajani Selvanayagam, a highly renowned Guru in Sri Lanka, I graduated as a Bharathanatyam student in 1995.

To correctly execute Bharathanatyam, or any other dance form, with no flaws requires extensive time and effort. The young students of Vishver Rangayathana who are undertaking lessons in Bharathanatyam are still in this delicate learning process, and most are only into their first or second year of practice.

In my dance concert, held on the 6th of September, I choreographed two dance items to Sri Lankan songs which incorporated some steps of the Bharathanatyam style. The students were adorned with the traditional bharathanatyam costume and jewellery, and performed only the aspects of Bharathanatyam that they have learned thus far. Ms. Vanaja Srinivasan appears to be demanding that these young students should excel in all aspects of this dance form- such a demand is clearly inconsiderate and unreasonable as they have only been exposed to Bharathanatyam for a short period of time. My aim was to allow my hard working students to proudly perform what they have learnt thus far to their family and friends, and it was my dear hope these young children would receive the encouragement and praise they deserved for their dedication and effort.

Bharathanatyam has distinct sections that must be mastered in a set order as follows; Alarippu, Jadeswaram, Shabdham, Padam, Varnam and Thilanam. If my students performed one of these segments of Bharathanatyam and did not succeed in presenting it correctly, then I would gladly accept any constructive criticism Ms. Vanaja Srinivasan wished to express. However, I am a teacher who ensures my students learn a dance form properly, and that means first learning the very basic elements before moving onto increasingly difficult elements of the dance style. Therefore, my students did not perform any of the complex sections named above, but instead presented only the basic Tattaduvus and Natyaduvus. I do not wish to ruin or hinder the dancing ability and further progression of my students by only teaching them the steps necessary for a concert. This would show a blatant disregard to my responsibility as a dance teacher by failing to nurture and guide my students to execute a dance form correctly. A sound understanding of the basic elements in any dance form is absolutely essential if a student is to excel- and this is clearly what I have aimed to do with my young students. I do not wish to jump the track in my teaching, but instead help my students perform to the best of their ability by teaching them methodically, step by step, the art of Bharathanatyam. Also, if I am incorrect in my methods of teaching as Ms. Vanaja Srinivasan has suggested, I do not see any reason for Indian students to also attend my Bharathanatyam classes.

I am confident that I am not an incapable person

To Horizon 3