



## The Dance of Victory

### Nagma Sinha

The cold winter evening of 28<sup>th</sup> December marked the retirement day for Shobha.

“Mrs Shobha, we can never thank you enough for the glorious contribution made in the last thirty-four years” said Mr. Ajit Trivedi, Divisional Railway Manager, Jhansi.

He handed over a memento along with a large bouquet of flowers to Shobha.

Shobha always had stage fright and it was the main reason for not giving stage performances during her school and college

days. She always liked to remain lost in the crowd where no one could notice that she even existed in that room.

It was now her turn to speak to conclude the retirement ceremony. Her palms were sweating and pearls of sweat around her face too. She had learnt the speech by heart last night and yet she hurriedly took out a slip of paper from her purse and walked towards the podium. This was her first public speaking performance.

“Uuuuhhhh.... Good evening to all of you. I am very sad to leave this wonderful organisation. I will cherish the time spent at the Railway Office and I thank all of you for your kind cooperation. Wishing you all a good life ahead. Thank you.” She didn’t lift her eyes throughout and read it with full speed, completely emotionless. She found some solace in holding her purse tightly with her right hand while she read out the speech with her left hand.

There was a sign of relief on her face as she finished her speech. She had strictly asked her son, Dev to write a short speech which just takes a maximum of a minute to recite.

The ceremony ended with a buffet dinner and Shobha got the last opportunity to spend time with her colleagues.

Next morning, Shobha rose at six and lay still sitting on her bed thinking how she would lead her life from today onwards. During her professional life as a Senior officer at the Railways, she never explored her personal interests. Her priority was to wake up at the break of dawn, do the household chores, prepare the lunch boxes for husband, children and herself and lastly have a hurried breakfast before travelling to office. In the evening, the relaxation time was watching television and listening to stories from her children.

On a few of the Sundays, she would go to see theatre or a dance recital.

She felt a bit uneasy that morning. There was a lot of emptiness around. She was someone who once preferred to be hidden inside a shell and wanted to now break out and do something meaningful with her life.

The first thought that came to her mind was “Kathak”. She had dreamt of learning it during her school days, but academics got the utmost priority and later after clearing the recruitment exam of the Indian Railways, there was no looking back.

“Manav, what do you think about me learning Kathak?” Manav, her husband, was taken aback. “What? What’s this suddenly? Just relax and enjoy life. What’s the need to unnecessarily strain yourself...? what do you want to prove?”

“I want to do something. I can't just be sitting idle at home. Besides this was something I always wanted to learn.... I know it's too late now. Probably I should drop it.”

“No, I didn't mean that. I am just saying that at this age you should focus on your health and well-being and remain stress free but it's your choice”

“If I do nothing, it will bring more stress. You too are retired but do you still like giving home tuitions or not?”

“That's quite different. It does not put me at a health risk!” Manav chuckled.

Shobha was precarious about exploring this venture at the age of sixty. Secondly, the fear of exposing her shortcomings in front of other dance class students could be embarrassing. On the other hand, she could not bear the thought of keeping herself away from her childhood dream and doing nothing about facing her life-time challenge of stage fright with aggression.

Adverse to her husband's recommendation, she gathered positivity after a week and walked down to a dance school about five hundred meters away.

Mrs. Rupa Iyer's voice could be heard quite clearly a few meters away from the door.

"Listen to the rhythm....no no.... It's tai tai tai ta...." Her conversation was interrupted by Shobha appearing at the door.

"Hello Madam, I am Shobha. I spoke to you over the phone yesterday for the Kathak course".

"Oh yes! Please come in." Shobha saw a group of women ranging from teenage to late twenties. Her face turned red and she put her eyes down thinking that all other pupils must be giving a wicked smile seeing a new pupil who is so aged and yet thinks of learning this physically taxing dance form.

"Shobha, don't be shy. I am always very happy to see women showing interest in Kathak. Nothing else matters"

"Today you can sit and observe the class. Starting tomorrow, we will begin. Fine?"

"Sure, I anyway have no experience in dancing, so will be a very slow learner"

"Oh! That's not unique. Everyone must start learning from zero. Don't worry"

Shobha sat through the class. The pupils appeared to have advanced through the course and were doing complex dance moves.

That night she could not sleep. She was nervous about her performance the next day.

"Today we will start with the basics...stand straight with your hands to the side and start tapping your feet one by one. First the left and then the right... Do it."

Shobha's heart was beating faster. She could see other pupils staring at her as a piece of entertainment.

“Shobha, Come-on...very good... one, two, one two”. The ghungroo tied on her feet gave a beautiful melody and Shobha slowly started leaving her reserved behaviour behind.

That evening she experienced a lot of pain and aches around her knee and elbow. At last her age of sixty years did catch up on her. These pain and aches continued for a few weeks. “This was bound to happen. Didn’t I warn you? We should have consulted Dr. Mishra beforehand. It’s a big risk for your bones” Manav exclaimed with a sense of victory.

“Please, I do not have a serious condition. It just seems like muscle pain and I know it’s because of my sedentary lifestyle now”

“I am fixing an appointment with the doctor tomorrow, period”

Dr. Mishra did a preliminary check-up the next day.

“Mrs. Shobha, you are pushing yourself too much I will say. Your bones are not very strong, and it needs to be nourished, otherwise there are serious consequences”

“You see, you have to accept that you are no longer a teenage lady.... Take the medicines I have prescribed and the exercises the physiotherapist will show you in the next room”

“I have been telling you since the beginning to drop this craziness”

Manav’s words kept echoing in her head the entire day. She thought to herself “What if I follow the doctor’s advice and Kathak together?”

Next morning, she followed the exercise instructions given by Dr. Mishra then attended the Kathak class. It was extremely painful in the next few weeks as the morning exercises added to the ailment. She thought it best not to discuss these

problems with her husband lest he asks her to quit her venture completely.

She started sharing her grievances and the enjoyment of dance with her daughter in law, Shreya who was a housewife after her pregnancy two years ago. She started enjoying her conversations around the dance classes with Shobha every evening.

It had been close to seven months into the classes. Shobha installed a long mirror in her room to practice after returning from classes. Her love for Kathak was blooming with each passing day. Influenced by her enthusiasm, Shreya would secretly watch her perform in front of the mirror and would try to imitate her when she was away.

Shobha noticed her inclination to learn the art but was not very comfortable to enroll her into the same class. Mrs. Rupa Iyer enrolled Shreya for the afternoon batch and at that time Shobha looked after her grandson, Raunak.

Now there were two learners under the same roof, however when it came to performance, it was only Shreya who would agree to show a glimpse of it on some of the weekends to the family. Shobha could not imagine following suit but she did wish to get over her fear of stage fright one day. To add to her woes, she would recall Dr. Mishra's words and religiously followed her exercise routine to avoid falling into the vicious trap of abandoning her mission.

One morning while walking towards the dance school, Shobha met her neighbour friend Sudha returning from the vegetable market.

“Good morning! Shobha, where are you off to?”

“Good morning! I am going to my dance class. Can't be late. Teacher's very strict”, she smiled

“Don’t take it otherwise but what is the need to learn dance at this age? You are not going to give a stage performance anyway. So, why take so much pain?”

“It’s not about any pain. I had always dreamt of learning Kathak and I think I am living my dream now”

“Anyway, it’s your choice. I would still say, give priority to your health and your family. All this dance and fun should have been dealt with during teenage days”

Shobha remained silent.

“Look, I care for you and that is why I am saying that it’s better to stop it at once. This is your age to devote substantial time to your grandson. Shreya cannot be doing it all alone. Your husband has been so supportive throughout your career and now if he does not want you to do something then why don’t you respect his decision? I know you want to do this but think about others too. There are lot of people mocking you behind your back in the neighbourhood”

After class, Shobha came home and cried for hours together. She was not prepared for so much humiliation.

She remained absent from class the next day. On Manav’s insistence, she opened her heart to him and cried uncontrollably.

“Shobha, I am against this, but I want to see you happy too. I see that you have developed enormous interest not only in the dance but also towards your health. The fact that it motivates you to exercise regularly gives more reason for you to continue it.

You have only heard Sudha’s opinion. Do you even know or care about what all narrow-minded gentry like her are saying or thinking? They will have a negative opinion even if you stop with the classes”

You are working against the odds to fulfil your dream and isn't it something to celebrate about?"

"I want my wife to be confident about what she wants to do even if everyone is against it including her husband. If you are giving utmost importance to your health, I am completely ok with it. I am sure you must be already shining in your class!" Shobha giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Please, I am still far behind others. A slow learner as always"

"You will get there. Don't worry. You have all the time in the world. Just don't miss your classes"

Shobha was not completely honest with Manav on her performance. Mrs Rupa Iyer had been praising her for giving the best facial expressions among all other pupils.

After two years, Shobha was offered an opportunity to give a solo stage performance. She was completely flabbergasted after hearing about this. Knowing her temperament, Mrs. Iyer asked her to think over her decision again as this would be a very golden opportunity for her to win over her life-old fear.

She tossed and turned on her bed. She had only given one stage performance in her life and that was at her retirement speech. She could not bear to think of the number of people who would be there to watch her every move and every mistake she may commit while performing. Above all, if Sudha and her like-minded group attends it, then they would get such sadistic pleasure out of it. She remained insomniac that night.

She could only find solace after talking to Manav.

"You have to do this. You need to fight with your fear now"

"I am very scared. I am getting butterflies in my stomach right now"

"You still have six months to practice before the main day. Think of the satisfaction you will get after that performance!"



Mrs. Iyer encouraged her too. “I perform among hundreds of spectators. If I keep thinking about what this one or that one will think, I have lost the battle already. So, I dance thinking that no one’s watching me. I am alone in the room”

About fifty people had come to Ravindra Bhawan to see the Kathak performance. Manav was so nervous that he stood on the passageway at the corner and thought of encouraging his wife lest she gets too intimidated. Shobha walked towards the front edge of the stage with a namaste and then began her performance. She didn’t attempt any eye contact with the audience, but her facial expressions were marvellous. There was a newspaper reporter who wanted to write about a woman who learnt Kathak at the age of sixty and never looked back. Manav was secretly observing the audience and few of them murmured softly during the performance. This was the first time he could watch his wife’s performance in total and was taken aback with the flexibility and the command of the musical rhythm she had with the musicians and the vocalist sitting at one corner of the stage. It was not a masterpiece, but it was a victory over a lifetime fear of stage.



## **Nagma Sinha**

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Nagma is the Business Head, South India at Outokumpu who loves creative writing. Her blogs on varied subjects related to politics, socio-economic, culture, art etc. are published at [nagmasinha.blogspot.com](http://nagmasinha.blogspot.com). Her short story “The Constant Shadow” has been published in the CLRI (Contemporary Literary Review India) journal, February 2023 Issue. She holds an MBA degree from Goa University and currently resides in Faridabad, Haryana (India).

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