

## **The power of Parasuram's imaginary axe**

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During the December 'Season' Chennai quickens to the pace of the mridangam and the flurry of dancers' bells in over a thousand performances of music and dance. For those of us who perform, there is the added perspective of all the drama that happens on stage and the postmortem that follows!

This past month, I observed a group of eight rehearse furiously for a show. Dancing in a group is more demanding than going solo. If directing one's limbs to stick to the rhythm isn't difficult enough, one has to ensure perfect co-ordination while weaving patterns with others in the group, adhering to a pre-set choreography.

When the group began to rehearse, one or more of the adult dancers would forget their position, leading to chaos— 'boys' and 'girls' colliding against each other with full force; two boys ending up together instead of with their female partners; someone stopping altogether in confusion and others continuing as though nothing had happened!

Gradually over thirty days, a group dynamic emerged that was distinctly the sum of the parts. The dancers managed to rein in their egos, tempers, and seared their memories with the right sequence of movements during the final rehearsal.

While practice does make perfect, what actually will happen during a performance cannot be predicted. There is something about the stage, a terrifying space made golden with lights, that can flummox even the most experienced of dancers. Intimidated by the audience, dancers struggle with the terms 'centre', 'front', 'angle', 'diagonal', having to instantly get their bearings as they emerge onstage in silks and glittering jewels.

Yesterday, things seemed to be going well when the best male dancer in the group, let us call him Nataraj, inexplicably

strayed from his spot. What should have been a beautiful semi-circle around a single person posing as one of the dashavatar, became an ugly claw with two dancers isolated on one side and five bunched up on the other! Not a problem...all that was required was quick thinking, the two moving up ahead allowing the bunch to spread out and complete the semi-circle.

But Nataraj froze, despite the girl behind him hissing 'Move! Move!' through the big smile creasing her face. My guru, stranded in the orchestra, was gesturing angrily with her eyes, banging the cymbals a little louder, trying to make the stone that was Nataraj move with her mind.

Unsettled, the dancers lost the split second precision required of them. Parasuram lifted his imaginary axe to kill, aiming the blow at the neck but his victim clutched her stomach and reeled about. Another two died even before he could even attempt to kill them. A fourth stepped on an open safety pin and hopped about in a private jig of agony. And then, mercifully, it was over and time to exit the stage. Nataraj turned smartly to the left, only to find a whole row of seven startled dancers facing him. It was just not his day!

As I left the green room filled with hot sweating bodies, I could hear my guru scolding them, 'all of you architects, mba-s, degree holders, not able to understand the simple concept of a line and a semi circle clearly, shame on you...' and I was happy not to be at the receiving end, for once!