Ananya Chakravarti '05 bounded up a narrow set of stairs into yet another shop. A bored rickshaw-puller sat on his rickshaw, passively gazing as Chakravarti looked through the merchandise. Inside the shop it was cool and quiet, but outside the heat was oppressive, even by India's standards, and buzzing scooters drove both ways on a street less than two yards wide. Chakravarti was in Old Delhi, the quarter of India's capital with the narrowest streets and the best traditional shopping.

She was looking for a set of anklets with bells, worn in Indian classical dance, for her Princeton dance troupe, Kalaa. Leaving the shop, she clutched a brown paper parcel. Her smile proclaimed victory.

But like many other members of Kalaa, Chakravarti contributes more to the group than aesthetic Indian garb. All members draw on their knowledge of Indian traditions and classic dance forms to create a show that brings India to life in Princeton.

Today, Kalaa is preparing for its third spring show. All 11 members of Kalaa, which means "art" in Sanskrit, have trained for years in this classical Indian dance form. Though they are all ethnically Indian, they are a diverse group whose only shared interest is dance. They hail from India, of course, but also from Michigan, Texas, California and elsewhere.

Nitya Das '06, who goes by Deepa, was born in Halifax, Canada but trained in the dance style called "Bharatanatyam" in Madras (Southern India) over extended vacations. Others, like Indrany Datta-Barao '05, learned dance outside of India. Datta-Barao was "born and raised in Texas" and uses dance, which she studied in Houston, as a way to understand her roots.

"Learning classical Indian dance was sort of ironic for me. Just ask Ananya and Deepa; they'll tell you I'm the whitest Indian they know," she said.

Interestingly, the group owes its existence to a dilemma Das and Datta-Barao faced two years ago. Eager to practice Indian dance, the students found a talented dance teacher near Princeton but couldn't afford $40 dollars a lesson twice a week. Soon Das found three other students who also did Indian classical dance, and in the winter of 2003, Kalaa formed.

Kalaa fuses culture with dance

Kalaa performs in three different traditional styles: Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathak. Most of the group does Bharatanatyam, a style which originated in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu thousands of years ago. Two of them do Kuchipudi, another South Indian dance, and two perform Kathak, which is a Northern Indian dance with Muslim influences. All the dances have a strong narrative component and centuries of tradition.

The other Indian dance troupe on campus, Naacho, does more contemporary dance, more in the style of Bollywood than the temple.

There is one so-called "fusion" piece, whose music is post-modern Indian electronics and features a mix of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi steps. But as Chakravarti proudly says, "The dancing, even in that piece, is completely classical."

Kalaa will present "Anjali" this Friday at 8 p.m. in the Frist Theater. Tickets are $7 and all proceeds will be donated to the Association for India's Development.

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